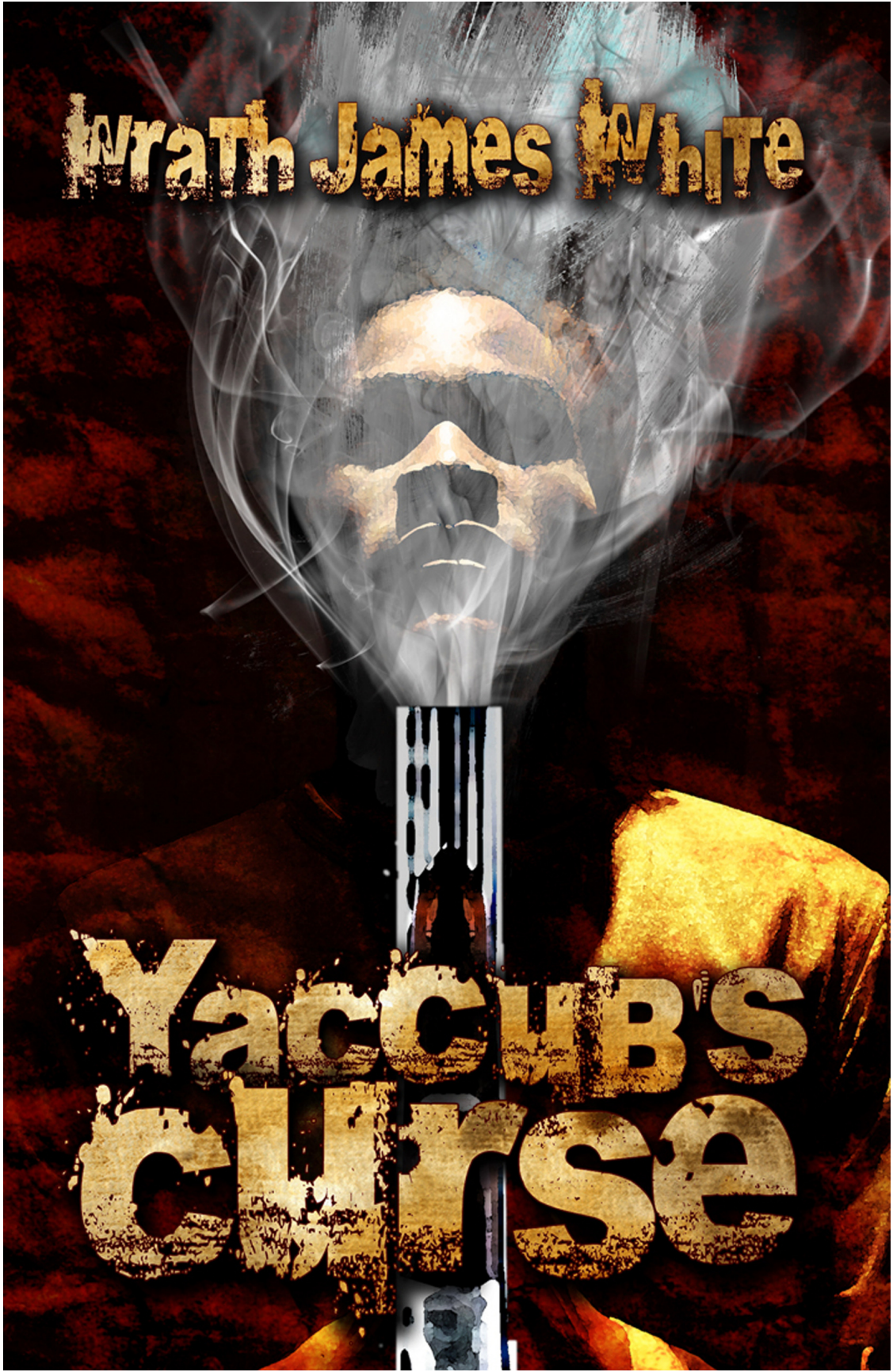


Wrath James White

YACCOUB'S
CURSE



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YACCUB'S CURSE

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To Sultan, my son. In hopes that you will inherit a better world than the one I did and a life free of racism, poverty, and violence. This is for you.

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Prologue

6,000 years ago on the island of Paeon in the Aegean Sea a child was created from the genetic material harvested from the followers of an ancient geneticist from Mecca named Dr. Yaccub. The child was of a pigment many shades lighter than the Africans from whose DNA he had been cloned and his eyes were like the sky and his hair like fields of wheat. But he had been created for destruction and his birth would signify the enslavement of the tribes of Shabass.

“...This once said by a girl who couldn’t quit/ dope man please can I have another hit/ then the dope man said I don’t give a shit/ if your girl kneels down and sucks my dick.”

—NWA, “Dope Man”

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A parade of lost souls shambled up and down Germantown Avenue as the day came to an end. The destitute and drug addled, in various stages of intoxication and withdrawal crowded the street in every direction. They staggered out of bars, nodded in alleys and doorways, and paced the sidewalk, desperate for the next score, eyes filled with hunger and madness. It looked like a blaxploitation version of *Night of The Living Dead*.

Dealers as old as fifty and as young as ten slang little white rocks of hardened cocaine mixed with baking soda to legions of the damned. Hopelessly addicted whores gyrated their emaciated half-naked bodies trying to attract a customer with whom to share their disease. Germantown Ave was one big outdoor fleamarket for drugs and sex.

The gaudy red BMW sat idling at the curb. Its driver, a light-skinned black man with a lopsided yellow-toothed grin, leered out at the whores wandering the avenue. The passenger in the back seat was obscured by night, watching as a teenage whore with a large round ass that had somehow survived the ravages of chronic cocaine use stepped out of the shadows. Those remarkable buttocks bounced and jiggled seductively as she strolled the avenue.

She had full succulent lips that were chapped and cracked where they had burned on the end of a glass pipe and breasts that had likewise remained full and ripe. She hadn’t yet lost as much weight as the other whores on the avenue but her hygiene had fallen to utter slovenliness. Her hair was a ragged tangle of split ends and singed knaps where a hot comb had burned it down to the roots. Her breath was an exhalation from the grave as if she’d brushed her teeth with road-kill and the stench wafting from between her thighs

was like she'd recently been inseminated by a corpse.

The minute she spotted the hideous gold-clustered front grille of the BMW sedan, she made a beeline for it. Even through the dense miasma of narcotics clouding her mind she could recognize a drug dealer when she saw one. Her foul breath steamed through the open window into the face of the pale grinning demon that sat behind the windshield.

"Hey, sexy, I'll suck your dick if you got some rock."

A ghostly hand wearing a diamond pinky ring and platinum Rolex rose up from the man's lap holding a crack pipe loaded with little white stones of hardened cocaine.

"Get in."

Quickly she wiggled around to the passenger side door and into the car.

"Hi, my name is Sissy," she said, smiling wide, her eyes aflame with desire for the rock rattling around in the fire chamber of the little pipe.

"I don't give a fuck what your name is," the man replied. When he turned to look the prostitute in the eyes she was shocked to see his white skin and blue eyes.

"You're a white boy?"

"What tha fuck do you care? A cock is a cock right? And a rock is a rock." He unzipped his pants and withdrew his modest erection. Then he grabbed a handful of Sissy's hair and shoved her head down into his lap ramming his penis past her tonsils. Sissy sucked obediently to keep from gagging as he stomped on the gas and sped off down the street.

The fire red BMW screeched into the parking lot of Lingelbach elementary school just as Sissy began to scream. Skeletal white hands held her head down as his organ exploded in her mouth, filling her throat with his warm seed. He held her head down as he continued to cum then he pinched her nose shut and shoved his cock even deeper into her throat until she choked. She gagged reflexively, her throat spasming and her stomach heaving, regurgitating into his lap as his cock swelled in her esophagus and semen spurted down her throat. He still did not release her. She began to thrash and fight against him as semen and vomit clogged her airway and the man continued to pinch her nose shut. He shoved a gun under her chin.

"If you bite me, bitch, you die that same second. You heard? Now, keep suckin'. You swallow my cum now bitch or I'll fly your fuckin' wig. Nasty bitch threw-up all over me. Yellow Dog, can you believe this shit?"

The driver, who was called Yellow Dog by everyone except his mother, laughed and shook his head. The white man continued applying pressure to the whore's neck, forcing his undiminished erection deeper and deeper until he could feel her mouth pressing into his pubic hair. Her eyes were wild, gasping for air, as he tucked the gun back into its holster and pinched her nose shut again. She punched at his thighs as tears wept from her eyes and she swallowed her own thick vomit and bile, almost throwing up again as it slid down her throat in warm nauseating chunks.

He let go of her nose and raised the crack pipe to his lips.

"Fire this shit up for me, Yellow Dog. I want to get high while this bitch sucks me off."

"Damn, Scratch, you got this bitch's vomit all over you. I ain't touchin' that shit. It's all over your hands too!"

"Fuck it. I'll do it myself then."

Even through her agony her eyes tracked the pipe as it fluttered above her, wanting to lose herself in its vapors. Scratch laughed, a shrill maniacal cackle, as he released her head in order to bring the disposable lighter to the bottom of the pipe and inhale deeply of the narcotic fumes.

Sissy's eyes rolled in her skull, wide with shock, as she raised her head from the white man's lap and gasped for breath. She fought back the spasm in her stomach that threatened to let loose with another bout of vomiting.

"You motherfucker! You almost killed me!"

"I guess I didn't try hard enough then."

He inhaled deeply and the crack pipe flared. He removed a .45 automatic from a shoulder holster as the cocaine roared through his veins. Scratch's eyes glowed like halogen lamps.

Scratch pointed the gun at the whore's stomach and pulled the trigger twice, blowing its contents onto the opposite door. The whore's aborted fetus flopped out onto the floor of the BMW along with much of her intestines.

He took another hit from the pipe then put the gun to the woman's temple and voided her brains onto the car window. He reached across the woman's corpse to open the car door. An avalanche of blood poured from her stomach wound, her mouth, nose, ears, and the hole in her temple. Her body flopped around in the seat, convulsing in its death throes. The driver shook his head in disgust looking back over the front seat at the dead prostitute bleeding all over the leather upholstery.

"I hope to hell you don't think I'm cleaning that shit up! Why'd you have to do that shit in the car?"

"Fuck it. I'll buy a new one."

The drug dealer opened the car door and kicked the prostitute's brutalized corpse out onto the sidewalk where it continued to kick and spasm. He reached down and picked the fetus up from where it lay half under the front seat. It had been nearly decapitated by the gunshot to its mother's belly. He held it up to his face and examined it closely.

"That's fuckin' nasty, yo! What the hell are you lookin' at that thing for?"

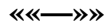
Scratch tossed the dead baby out of the car onto the sidewalk beside its mother.

"Just fuckin' drive."

Chapter 1

“If you don’t know me then you’ve no right to judge me! I’ve got a good heart but this heart can get ugly.”

—DMX



I bite down on the barrel. I never liked the way metal tasted, especially not gun metal and not a gun that’s been used as much as mine. I can still taste sulfur and gunpowder on the steel. I can taste the oil from its last cleaning. My teeth grate against the metal and a sound like metal in a blender rakes through my skull. I try to imagine what the bullet will feel like. If there will be pain before oblivion.

Che` Guevera said *“Freedom comes from the barrel of a gun.”* He meant freedom from your oppressors, but the axiom applies equally to freedom from one’s self. From what we are. What we have become.

“I’m going to blow my fucking head off!”

I said it aloud for my own benefit. I needed to hear it. I wasn’t trying to shock anyone. There’s no one else in the house but me. I just wanted to see if I could actually say it. If I could mouth the words around the gun barrel. To test the depths of my conviction. I felt as if I needed to get the words out before the gun would fit properly.

I slip my finger onto the trigger. I’m still not ready. There’s still more words inside of me. Words that have to be spoken before I pump this last shell into my skull and rid the world of another young monster. You’ve got to know why this is necessary.

I reach over and turn on the old tape recorder. It whirs to life and I let out a deep sigh. I open my mouth to speak but the only things that come out of me are tears. They shame me. Not because I think they make me weaker or less of a man, but because I have no right to them. Not after all the pain I’ve caused.

It takes me a few more minutes to get myself back under control before I can continue. I press rewind on the tape recorder and erase the sound of my self-pity. That’s at least one secret I will keep to myself. I press play again.

I’m going to tell you about evil. It’s a long involved story and it damn sure ain’t pretty, but it’s something I’ve got to tell, something you’ve got to hear. Because I want you to hate it like I do. I want you to fight it, in the world and in yourself. Because there’s evil everywhere. Every-fucking-where.

The story has to begin with me because I’m part of it. I’m a great big fucking part of it.

My name is Malik Black. I was born in Philadelphia’s Germantown section. G-town. The ghetto. A slightly nicer ghetto than some of the others in Philadelphia, but a

ghetto nonetheless. My shocked and appalled little body was evicted screaming and protesting from my mother's womb as the summer died and gave birth to fall in September of 1985. I grew up during the height of the drug epidemic or war or whatever the fuck you want to call it. By the time I was old enough to walk the streets unchaperoned they were already tacky with blood, crunchy with broken crack viles, beer bottles, and hypodermic needles, filthy with spent shell casings and wasted dreams. I was carrying a gun myself by the age of ten.

Around the way they called me "Snap" because my temper was as quick as my trigger finger. I'd have fit right in in the Wild West. I killed my first human being at the age of twelve. I'd like to tell you it was something I had to do, that my back was against the wall and I had no other choice. But we've all got choices. I killed because I wanted to.

Everybody thinks I'm crazy. I probably am. I didn't start out as a killer though. None of us did. The psychotropic depressant of ghetto life, of waking up everyday to watch the roaches scurry from the morning light and the crack whores scamper to catch the last trick of the day, of going to sleep to the sound of gunfire and the cries and curses of domestic violence, altered critical neuro-pathways in my brain warping an otherwise civilized human being into the hardened gangsta I am now.

Perhaps I am a bad seed genetically predisposed to murder, some mad scientist's joke on the world like Scratch said. Some may argue that I inherited my rage from my father and all the generations of angry black men that preceded him. I don't know what the truth is anymore. Nothing makes sense.

I didn't vivisect animals in my basement, set fire to old folk's homes, or read crime novels and dream of infamy. I wasn't the only thing that went wrong with my generation. It was the entire decade in which I was born that was hostile and deranged and I simply conformed to this fucked up climate, instinctively acting for the preservation of self. But even that might be a lie. It's possible, that I started it all, if not now then generations ago, eons ago.

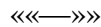
It should have been no surprise that the rage, violence, hatred, and hopelessness of G-town, the same place that gave birth to me, would have drawn an even greater evil to it. That worse things than our little gang would be attracted to the heat of gunfire, the screams of the dying, and the rivers of blood that ran down the street gutters like worthless sewage. G-town was the nexus of all realities. It's where all the shit landed in Philadelphia when it fell.

But how would we have spotted a monster amongst the madness we lived in everyday? Most of my friends were murderers, thieves, drug dealers. Some were rapists. Some were worse. You pick out the monster. I had bodies on me too. None of us were angels.

Now, it's easy to see Scratch for what he really is. Hindsight is pretty damn near omniscient. But back then dude just looked like one of us. Like just another pissed off thug. We were so busy doing our own evil we wouldn't have recognized Satan if he'd been sitting right beside us waiting for us to pass him a blunt or a forty, which he often was. Yeah, I brought the devil to his throne in G-town. But I was the one who sent his ass back to hell too.

Of course Scratch was well on his way to becoming a serious ghetto star when I met him in that old lot on Cherokee Street five years ago. With my help though, he

became a superstar.



Germantown, sitting like a jungle cat waiting to spring on the Northwest side of Philadelphia, wasn't what you would call hell. That was further east in North Philadelphia. But it was a hellacious place for us impressionable youths to learn the ways of the world. I often wonder how my perspective might have been different if I had grown up in Cherry Hill New Jersey or some lily-white suburb on the Main Line. How long would it have taken me to learn to hate? In Germantown we were weaned on violence and hatred. My boy Huey liked to say that when kids are born in the ghetto the doctors smacked them until they stopped crying.

G-town was where all the Black folks from North Philly moved when they started making a little bank and got bold enough to attempt to improve their living conditions. It was pure futility really because as soon as Black families moved in the white families moved out, the city began to neglect the neighborhood, allowing it to fall into disrepair becoming no better than the slums they left behind. They paid exorbitant prices to escape the ghetto and buy into this more integrated neighborhood only to see their property values plummet as white folks packed up as fast as black folks moved in and with them left all the public utilities and maintenance. Street lamps stayed broken for months casting entire blocks into a deadly sinister darkness that incubated crime. The streets fell into disrepair as the road crews neglected them allowing them to crack and split becoming an obstacle course of potholes and fissures. The sidewalks crumbled providing ammo for rock fights. Sometimes the trash wouldn't be picked up for weeks and garbage would blow up and down the street smothering the neighborhood in stench and debris.

Mom and I took to driving our garbage up to Chestnut Hill and dropping it off in front of the homes of rich white folks. Buildings would sometimes burn to the ground before fire trucks arrived and then their charred skeletons would remain for years, swaying in the breeze and providing refuge for crackheads, junkies, and winos. When they finally got around to demolishing the rat infested deathtraps, they rarely rebuilt. The neighborhood was filled with these empty lots scarring the landscape; irregularly spaced between the endless rows of identical homes like gaps in a smile. Police brutality and harassment increased exponentially with the Caucasian exodus and getting an officer's help was like trying to squeeze your ass through a donut hole. By the time my generation came along, this nice integrated neighborhood had become like an extension of North Philly; just another fuckin' ghetto filled with the angry and the hopeless.

My family and I lived on Ambrose Street, between Washington Lane and Duval Street, a few blocks from G-town High and only a mile or two from Wissahickon Park. It was also adjacent to Mount Airy, an upper middle class neighborhood where people like Patti Labelle and Teddy Pendergrass lived.

Mt. Airy had old colonial mansions and lush tree-lined streets so everyday we got a first hand look at what we would never have. Because of our proximity to them, we

went to the same schools as the Mt. Airy kids and they were always eager to rub our noses in their comparative wealth. This made us acutely aware of our own poverty and desperate for and resentful of their affluence. Desperate enough to rob our neighbors, kill, sell drugs, pimp, ho, or whatever nefarious enterprise would get us paid the most and the fastest. It was better to live down in North Philly where at least you would never see what you were missing.

Everyone I knew from G-town would lie in school and claim to be from Mt. Airy; ashamed of their destitution. That is until gangsta rap blew up and poverty suddenly became fashionable. Over night there were suddenly punk ass Mt. Airy boys and even white boys from Chestnut Hill wearing their pants saggin' off their hips, toting nine millimeters and claiming thug life, frontin' like they grew up in the G or in North Philly just to seem hard, eager to capitalize off the inherent hipness of the underclass. It was disgusting and it infuriated me.

We lived in a three bedroom row home that was nearly two centuries old and not carrying its age well at all. It was made of red brick that had faded to a chalky orange color and looked like every other house on the block. In the summer it was an oven and in the winter it was a meat locker. They didn't know a lot about insulation back in the seventeen hundreds.

I can remember few truly happy moments in that drafty old haunt. Watching creature double feature at the foot of Mom's bed and listening to her calm breathing as she slept away on Saturday afternoons, playing with the dog in the yard, eating my Grandma's sweet potato pie and my Mom's fried chicken, catching crawfish in the creek that ran through Wissahickon Park and coming home and trying to breed them in the bathtub, having sex with the babysitter, shooting squirrels and pigeons off the powerlines with slingshots and pellet guns. But mostly all I can remember is the violence and the rage.

Annabella Black, a gorgeous, nearly six foot, chocolate black, amazon goddess was my mom. Everyone called her Bella, which means beautiful in Italian, except my grandma who still called her Annabella Blacksmith even though she knew we had dropped the "smith" off our names before I was even born. Mom didn't want me to be born with the name of my Great great great grandfather's slave master.

To this day I've never met a woman more lovely than my mother. She looked like she had ridden a sun beam down from heaven and I loved her more than anything in creation, which wasn't hard because I hated just about everything else. My Dad's name was Darryl and he looked like something that had stepped off the wall of a pyramid, but he had problems...violent problems.

Mom used to say that Vietnam destroyed the best Black Men of her generation...even those who made it home. She kept telling me how Pops was a good man before the war but that all the horrors he had witnessed and was forced to participate in had twisted him.

Pops was 6'2" tall, lanky, ripped with hard wiry muscle, midnight black, with a huge wooly afro, a goatee, a boyish smile, dark smoldering eyes, and big hands roped with veins ending in long spidery fingers. He looked like that famous painting "The Moorish King" that hung in the Philadelphia Art museum, like a Black Moses. His voice was smooth like marijuana smoke curling out of the end of one of those hand-carved

pipes and he had game. He could put the mack down on a female so smooth that her panties would slide off from their own lubrication. If he hadn't married mom he probably would have wound up being a pimp. As it was, he was totally legit.

He worked hard doing construction work for the city and brought home every cent to care for my mom and me, but like many hard working men he drank hard too. When he wasn't working, Pops and I would sit on the living room floor playing with GI Joe, army men, video games, and electric race sets while he slowly drank himself into an introspective fugue. When the toys inevitably broke, he always seemed to be more depressed about it than I was and replaced them immediately. He would play football with the older kids on the block after work and they all looked up to him like he was a big brother or something. Still, they were all afraid of him. He was one mean-ass-nigga. He was known to chase people off of his car at shotgun point and more than one of the neighborhood kids had watched as their dads were beaten bloody by him. He was nothing to fuck with and no one did.

There were rumors that he had killed people and I couldn't really deny it. He had killed in Nam so why not in the hood?

Pops was one of those psycho Nam vets. Not the kind that climb towers and shoot demons dressed as pedestrians but the kind that have flashbacks and scare the hell out of their families. With eyes glazed staring deep into a long ago tropical jungle he would scream and cry believing that he was back in Saigon dodging mortar fire. During these episodes he often beat my Mom up pretty badly. It still wounds me to remember the flow of her tears and how helpless I was to staunch their tide. If Pops was around today and he tried that shit I'd put his ass right where he is now, on the wrong side of the grave. Deep down, I guess I'm still waiting to settle the score. I owe him some pain for hurting my mother. For making that elegant goddess weep.

Sometimes I wonder if all the shit I've been through has just been preparation for the day when I finally see that sonuvabitch again. And I will someday. I'll see him in hell. And then we'll settle up.

To this day I can remember the gruesome war stories he used to tell and how they would keep me up all night terrified that the "Cong" were creeping through the bushes, preparing to ambush me and drag me off to a prison camp. He once told me how the guys in his platoon would take captured Vietnamese soldiers and tie them upside down to a tree then beat them in the head with bamboo poles until their brains would leak out of their ears. I couldn't picture it then. Now it's easy to imagine. I've accomplished similar feats with my shotgun. Back then, however, as I cringed in the dark listening to my mother's screams and his angry curses, his stories would warp my dreams into a gore-streaked delirium. I guess they scared him too because he always slept with his eyes open.

Once when I was just five years old he was in the midst of a really bad hallucination and had my mom down on the living room floor with her arms pinned behind her back, the stained glass coffee table was shattered and he was cursing and crying, but his eyes were glassy and far off, focused on nothing, full of rage and fear. I knew he wasn't in our apartment anymore, but in a Vietnamese jungle thousands of miles away. He punched my Mom in her head and I saw her eyes roll back revealing the whites. She looked as if she had died. Then he began to strangle her. That's when I ran into the kitchen and grabbed the knife.

It was one of those carving knives they sold on TV. The one where the guy saws through a tin can without dulling the blade. I stared at the lethal looking serrations that ran like a row of shark's teeth down the edge of the blade and my heart fluttered. My legs filled with lead. I raised the knife, but I couldn't move my feet to cross the distance that separated me from my desperately struggling mother. There was a strangled exhalation that sounded like the last gasp of a dying man and that got me moving. Mom was dying.

I ran into the living room and let out a yell that sounded like something from a Tarzan movie. I plunged the blade between his shoulder blades stabbing it in as deep as my five-year-old muscles would permit, which wasn't much at all. He spun around and punched me hard, like you would strike a grown man, like you would strike an enemy. He knocked me out cold.

When I woke up I was in a hospital and my Mom was beside me screaming and crying in hysterics.

"You muthafuckin' evil bastard! You hurt my baby! If he ain't alright I swear to God you're a dead muthafucka! You hear me, nigga?! You's dead muthafucka!" My mother was standing right in Pop's face. Her 5'11" looked every bit as formidable as his 6'2"; her arms just as sinuous, her afro just as wild and woolly, her eyes shooting napalm. She had a mother's instinctive fury when her offspring is threatened and even a bad muthafucka like Pops found himself humbled by it. His head was bowed and his hands were clasped in front of him fidgeting nervously. His eyes were red and full of tears (Though none would ever spill down his cheeks. He was too damned proud for that.) He kept casting worried looks in my direction throughout Mom's diatribe.

"Baby, I'm sorry. You know I'd never hurt that boy on purpose. See, look. His eyes are open. He's all right, baby..." He looked desperate and Mom wasn't going for it.

"What? You some fuckin' kind of doctor now? How tha fuck do you know he's all right?" She spat, glowering at him with her fierce bloodshot eyes.

"How's my baby? Don't worry Momma's gonna take care of you. Aw, look at your beautiful face. Look what that bastard did to your pretty face!"

I didn't care what he had done to my face. To me, my face wasn't no big deal anyway. Round and pudgy instead of hard and lean like the cowboys and gangsters on television. I was more concerned with what he had done to her face. It was bruised and swollen, a huge black and purple hematoma covered her right eye, her lip was split open and plumped to the size of a ping-pong ball.

I cried when I looked at the damage my father had done. He had vandalized her. Beat a reckless graffiti of welts and bruises across her flawless face. I hated myself for letting him see me cry. This man who had taught me that men never cried. Who had broken me out of my fear of water by holding my head an inch above the seawater so that the waves would crash into me as they rolled in and held me like that until I finally stopped crying five or ten minutes later. Who had taught me to fight in preschool by punching the shit out of me and making me punch him back while ordering me not cry. Who goaded me into my first fight at age four, a dispute over a goddamned tricycle, and patted me on the back when I beat a bigger, older boy viciously without shedding a tear and without stopping until I saw blood even when he was down, despite the kid's blubbering apology and pleas for mercy. But I wasn't crying for me. I was crying for him. Because I loved him, because I admired him, the coolest dad on the block, and

because I knew I was gonna have to kill him someday. And because I knew Mom would miss him.

Mom gingerly inspected my contusions letting me know that my nose was broken and that two of my teeth were missing. Baby teeth. They would grow back. I'd also received a concussion and for years afterward Mom would blame it for all of my madness. Softly I caressed her blackened eye and savaged lip with my tiny fingertips as the tears flowed freely down my face. Her tears began to flow also. I turned to glare into Pop's face and was amazed to find that he couldn't meet my gaze, cowed by the weight of his own guilt. He bowed his head and shuffled out of the room cursing to himself as if his foul mouth could fight off his shame. My eyes followed him right out the door. I was no longer afraid to show my tears. I displayed them proudly; this small rebellion against his will.

"If he ever hurts you again I'm gonna kill 'im, Mom. I swear Momma, I'll kill 'im if he hurts you again!" I broke down and my quiet tears became racking sobs as Mom held me in her arms. She rocked me, humming softly, until I fell asleep. As I lay snoring in her lap, she began to wonder what life would be like as a single parent.

She left him a few years later when I was eight years old and moved in with my grandmother. Grandma was a bible thumping Baptist, 40 pounds overweight with bad knees, arthritis in her hands, gray hair, extremely hypocritical and judgmental as the devout tend to be, but loving and tolerant almost doting with me even if she could not extend the same compassion and understanding to her own child. I was her first born grandson and as such I could do no wrong. Life with her was great. She and Mom fought a lot but it never got violent like with Darryl (I no longer called him Pop and never would again.)

Fighting had become a sort of hobby with me. It was the only thing I was good at. My mother and grand mother were constantly forced into the position of consoling parents whose children had received a taste of my wrath. The older kids and the big-time players who hung out in front of the corner store selling weed and talkin' shit used to bet on my fights and sometimes pay me to beat up other little kids just to give them something to watch.

My very first day in the neighborhood I got into it with an older boy.

"Hey, little bro. You need some new kicks and bad. Them sneaks you got on are so dogged out that they's barkin'!" He laughed.

The kid had been riding by my porch on a Huffy mountain bike and had stopped in the middle of the street just to diss me about my worn out sneakers. Someone else's poverty was not something you joked about in the ghetto. I rose from that stoop knowing that we were going to brawl.

He probably mistook me for an older kid because of my size and wanted to try to improve his rep by being the first one on the block to beat up the new kid.

He was about ten years-old, three years older than me, ink black, skinny as a famine victim, and wore his hair in a wild afro. He had bucked teeth and big lips and probably had a chip on his shoulder about it. So naturally I made them the focus of my verbal assault.

"Fuck your old buck-toothed Donald Duck lookin' ass!"

The bigger kid was off his bike and at my throat in half a second.

“What the fuck did you call me?”

I didn't really want to tangle with this older kid so I decided to let him know how young I was.

“Man you a punk! Messin' with an eight year-old kid as big as you is!”

He wasn't going for it though and he punched me right in my mouth. I fell over and he dove on top of me preparing for the ground and pound, but some teenagers who were hangin' out on the corner caught the whole exchange and luckily intervened on my behalf.

“Yo, Sid! Man, don't be messin' with that little kid. Why don't you pick on somebody your own size?”

They gathered around us and pulled him off of me, but not before he delivered two more blows to my head. While they held him I jumped up and punched him right in the stomach, doubling him over. The teenagers all laughed.

“This a tough little thug right here! He took that ass whuppin' and he ain't even cryin'. I remember how Sid used to cry like a little bitch every time somebody got in his ass.”

Sid wanted to jump on me again, but the other kids held him back.

“Don't even fuck with him Sid 'cause you shouldn't have started with him in the first place. Now ya'll are even.”

“Naw fuck that!” Sid shrieked in a high-pitched falsetto whine that raked my nerves. “I ain't lettin' this little bitch get away with that! I'll let my little brother kick his ass. They both the same size. Yo, Jay!”

Sid pulled free from the other boys and called to some kids up the street who were racing Hot Wheels cars down a large pile of dirt that was sitting in the middle of the sidewalk for some inescapable reason in front of a burnt out house. The biggest one of them lifted his head and looked our way. Jay was a carbon copy of his brother, big lips, bucked teeth and all. He was slightly smaller than his older sibling though still larger than me. He was perhaps only a year younger than his older brother. He trotted over wearing brand new shell-top Adidas and a red and white Sixers jersey.

“Jay, take care of my light work!”

He pointed towards me and I looked at the older boys for help, but apparently this was all fair and honorable to them because they backed off to give us room to fight, forming a loose circle around us. I looked back over at my grandmother's house and was amused to see her and my mother still unloading the U-haul truck. We hadn't even moved in good yet and here I was already about to get into a fight. My mom probably thought I was playing innocently and was no doubt happy to see how quickly I was making friends.

I knew I could have gotten myself out of all that drama just by calling for her, but then these kids would have thought I was a punk and a mama's boy. In retrospect, that may not have been such a bad thing. Instead I took the first step on the road to building one of the most fearsome reputations the G had ever known. I stepped up to that kid like I was the baddest little muthafucka on the planet.

“If I win, I'm takin' those sneaks.” I said pointing down at his shiny new Adidas.

“You ain't gonna win, punk!” he replied and as far as I was concerned that was as good as a handshake.

“Bet!” I said and began swinging hooks at his head as hard and fast as I could

surprising myself by landing more than I missed. He tried to swing back, but his punches were smothered by the deluge of blows I was raining down on him. I started kicking at him too and pretty soon he was turning to run. I tackled him and threw him in a headlock.

“Now give up those sneaks or I’m gonna tear your head off!” I was jerking on his neck and dragging him around the street. He was crying and calling for his brother, but the older boys were once again holding Sid back.

“Your brother ain’t helping you, fool! Now take them sneaks off! I ain’t playin!”

He took them off and I took them home. When my mom asked me where I had gotten them from I told her some of the kids down the street had found them and since I was the only one small enough to fit them they let me have them for a dollar. Lying came as easily to me as fighting.

“And where did you get a dollar from?”

“Grandma gave it to me yesterday.”

“Well, I think you spent it well,” Grandma interrupted, peeking over her glasses at my little feet then back at the shoes I held in my hands. “Them old things you wearin’ now are ’bout ta fall off your feet.”

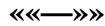
My mom went back outside to finish emptying the truck before Grandma could start in on her about how dirty I always looked and how she had never let any of her children look that way.

I wore those Adidas, the first brand name sneakers I had ever owned, until my toes busted out the front and beat Sid with a stick when he tried to get them back from me.

Chapter 2

“Don’t you know... That it’s true... That for me... And for you... The World Is A Ghetto?”

—War, “The World Is A Ghetto”



There was a war going on in our neighborhood. Every morning you could smell the burnt carbon and sulfur lingering in the air after a gun battle. It filled your nostrils as you rose to greet the day. No bacon and eggs. No morning paper. Instead you counted the bullet holes in the walls from stray shots to see how close you’d come to not waking up at all and checked your family members to make sure there wasn’t suddenly one less.

In school you could see that wide-eyed shock and nervous fidgeting of post traumatic stress disorder on kids as young as eight and nine who had already lost brothers, cousins, or even parents and grandparents to the war. Some of them were already soldiers themselves. I was insulated from most of it by over-protective parents and living the proper distance from the Avenue. My street was mostly quiet. I was one of only four kids on the block. The rest were all old people. There just wasn’t much gang activity among the geriatric set. But ours was just a small oasis in a desert of violence and crime. Even on the next block there were bodies dropping almost nightly as the hierarchy of criminal power resolved itself through gunfire.

Increased pressure from the government forced the Mafia out of the street-level drug business leaving other organized gangs to fight over the lucrative market which was suddenly wide open. The Jamaican drug posses came blasting through the neighborhood eager to take over the cocaine business, that the Italians had abandoned, from the local thugs, the so-called Junior Black Gangsta Lords. The results were drive-by shootings that left more innocents dead than the intended targets. Including children. Then there was Scratch, a white drug dealer from North Philadelphia who was starting to prop his dealers up in some of the open air drug markets up and down Germantown Avenue. He kept a low profile, but it was pretty well known that he was waiting to mop up after the war between the Jamaicans and the JBGL. He had used the same opportunistic approach in North Philadelphia and now he was the biggest dealer in that part of the city with a crew of nearly a thousand soldiers and dealers. He was the last thing G-town needed.

When the Jamaicans took over the JBGL Scratch started making his presence known more and more and the results were lots of dead Jamaicans. Scratch’s reputation was one of unbelievable violence. The reality of his activities on the street was worse than anything you’d ever heard in even the most brutal gangsta-rap song or over-the-top slasher movie. Scarface didn’t have shit on him. In G-town, he fit right in. Soon, his

dealers were shoulder to shoulder with dealers from the JBGL competing for customers on the Ave.

Germantown Avenue separated a dungeinous slum of filth, poverty, and despair on the Eastside from the only slightly more tolerable ghetto on the West. Between the two lay a stretch of concrete wilderness that contained more bars and liquor stores per square inch than any zoning commissioner would allow anywhere but in a slum that was carefully planned to remain that way. Churches, fast food joints, bars, and liquor stores, and in front of each one prowled a drug dealer eager to capitalize off the hopelessness that each venue attracted.

“Oh, Jesus didn’t do it for you today, huh? You don’t want to wait for heaven do ya? You want something that’ll take you there right now? Well, I got just the thing.”

“Hey, big girl! What some fool dumped you so now you’re gonna binge on fried chicken to forget him? All that’s gonna do is make you so fat you’ll never be able to get another man. Here, this’ll help you forget him and lose a few pounds too. Smoke on this for a while and soon you won’t be thinkin’ about that man or that chicken,” a dealer named Yellow Dog hollered as he hung out the passenger side window of a blood-red BMW that looked as if it had been caught in a jewelry store explosion.

Scratch didn’t just hire drug dealers he hired drug *pushers*. Everyone who worked for him was a salesman for the product. And they were all killers. Yellow Dog was the worst of them. He was second in command, if there was such a thing, and was as dangerous as a hyena. He was so light-skinned that he almost looked white himself except for his wide nose and thick lips.

The red BMW cruised slowly up the Ave with Scratch behind the wheel and Yellow Dog leering out the window at the crackwhores prancing and preening for all the dealers and customers alike that glutted the overpopulated street. It looked like some type of festival was going on, “Crack Head Day” or some shit.

“You said you wanted a pregnant one right?” Yellow Dog asked with his eyes still hunting through the parade of drug ravaged flesh.

“Yeah, one that’s just about to pop.” Scratch replied. His eyes radiated more hatred than lust, but Yellow Dog seemed oblivious.

“That’s some sick shit, bro. But I know a lot of guys who like them knocked up whores. They say the pussy’s wetter and their titties are all fat and swollen. I knew a cat who liked to drink milk from them pregnant bitches’ titties. He said it tasted like cream. He got his girl knocked up and tried to drink that bitch dry. After the baby was born he would be nursing right alongside the little rugrat.”

“That’s not what I want the bitch for.” Scratch replied with his blue eyes still spitting icy flame and Yellow Dog fell silent.

“Hey, there’s a pregnant bitch right there but I don’t think she’s a whore though.”

“Is she buyin’ crack?”

“Yeah, I think she is.”

“Then she’s a fuckin’ whore! Go scoop her ass up.”

“Yeah, but I’ve seen that chick walking around with her head all wrapped up. I think she’s a Muslim or some shit.”

Scratch smiled wide so that his gold plated smile caught moonlight and beamed it back.

“Even better. Go get that bitch.”

Yellow Dog wasn't really down with raping a Muslim woman, but he was even less enamored of the idea of having his head blown off by his murderous employer for disobeying orders. Scratch pulled to the curb and Yellow Dog slipped from the car. He hit the sidewalk right beside the Muslim woman and whispered into her ear.

“Aren't you with the Nation, sister? What you doin' up here buyin' crack?”

Startled, the woman whirled around and found herself staring into the sleepy-eyed leer of the mulatto gangsta who grinned at her like he'd caught her with a dick in her mouth. She looked at him and then quickly dropped her eyes to her feet.

“I-I-I have a problem.” She stammered as she tried to walk around him and avoid his accusatory eyes.

“Well, then let me help you, sista.”

“What do you know about it?”

“I know that it wouldn't do for anyone else to see you up here on the Ave. Why don't you hop in my ride and let me get you out of here. Then I'll get you fixed up proper.” Yellow Dog opened his hand to reveal the four vials of crack rolling around in his palm and her eyes were instantly drawn to them. She didn't hear a word he said after that. Nothing else mattered. She would have followed him anywhere for the promise of the pipe. Her addiction was strong. Obviously Allah had not been enough to tame it.

Yellow Dog walked with her to the Beemer and opened the passenger door with a flourish. When she looked in and saw Scratch behind the wheel she turned to Yellow Dog with rage and disgust twisting her face into a vicious snarl.

“You didn't say anything about riding with no devils!”

“All White people aren't devils, young lady...” Scratch pulled his big shiny nickel plated .45 and pointed it right at the woman's belly. His eyes gleamed with a feral lust that ignited the icy irises like lanterns. “...Just me. Now get the fuck in this car and let me show you some of this here tricknology.”

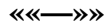
He grinned wider as Yellow Dog covered her mouth to prevent her from screaming and shoved her into the car.

“Allow me to introduce myself, sista. My name is Scratch and I'm the trickster your minister warned you about.”

Chapter 3

“Man is the only animal that can remain on friendly terms with the victim he intends to eat until he eats them.”

—Samuel Butler



After living in that neighborhood for several months and mostly playing by myself I somehow managed to make friends with a few kids. Nikky and his big brother Warlock were my first real road dogs in the neighborhood. Warlock was a sixteen year-old drug dealer, graffiti artist, and wannabe pimp. He wore Cross Colors sweat suits, and gold chains so thick they looked like slave restraints. His hair was cut into a gravity-defying block taper that stuck up more than a foot from his head.

Warlock was a lethal looking street snake with eyes that were perpetually narrowed in suspicion and yellowed from blunt smoke. He was skinny as a rail and knee-high to a sewer rat, but he was known to be quick as death with a switchblade. With a knife in his hand Warlock would take on men twice his size. He was like a magician whose stainless steel prestidigitation could leave a brother cut from his ass crack to his nut sack in the silence between heartbeats. Warlock had much respect around the way. His brother Nikky was comparatively square.

Nikky was a shy kid who spent all his time drawing, daydreaming, reading comic books, and writing graffiti. Still, he got respect for his lyrical skills. Nikky was an aspiring hip-hop artist who could spin rhymes off the top of his head without missing a beat even though he often stuttered just trying to say hello.

He never wrote any of his rhymes down, but I suspected that during the long minutes he spent daydreaming he was really composing the complex lyrics that were his trademark. He could hold an entire crowd of teenagers enthralled as he stood on the corner spittin’ his gift like a ghetto griot, telling the stories of our lives.

Nikky was thicker than his brother and average height for an eight year-old. His hair was cut conservatively short with rippling waves and tapered on the sides. Both he and his brother were the color of polished oak but where Nikky’s skin was smooth and unblemished, Warlock’s face was a minefield of scars and pock marks and his teeth were covered with braces that looked like a mouthful of barbed wire. Somehow Warlock managed to make that metallic grin look cool. I even asked my mother if I could get braces just to look like him. Unfortunately my teeth were completely straight.

The day I first met the two brothers they were propped up against Warlock’s powder blue 1988 Lincoln Continental blasting Public Enemy’s “Fight The Power” as loud as his over-priced stereo system could crank and arguing with another kid Warlock’s

age about who could rap better him or Nikky. Warlock was pimpin' a pair of baggy Turkish pants in that MC Hammer style and an oversized polka dot dress shirt. He wore a furry red Kangol cap on his head and snake skin Stacey Adams. Nikky was dressed more conservatively in a pair of baggy Jive pants that hung low on his hips so that his red and white polka dot Calvin Klein boxers were visible and a T-shirt his brother had airbrushed in wild style graffiti letters that spelled out G-town. I stared at their clothing practically drooling with envy. If it wasn't for the fact that Nikky looked so self-conscious and uncomfortable in his clothes I would have hated him instantly. I hated anyone rich and anyone coming on my block wearing a pair of \$60 Jive jeans while I wore my \$19.99 J.C. Penny's Tough Skins would have been a hated enemy. But there was something about this kid. Even Warlock still looked like a street kid who'd found his fairy godmother and had been blessed for a time with princely garb. There was a fear in his eyes, just below the surface, that all of this wouldn't last. That tomorrow the car, the stereo, the clothes might all be gone and he'd be right back in the projects choking on filth.

The kid that stood between them was an obvious hanger on. One of those who believed coolness could be passed through osmosis. He wore a greasy do-rag beneath which his naps were baking in an S-curl pomade. His fake Gucci sweatshirt was stained with the stuff. His name was Devin but he preferred to be called "Divinity". When I walked up they had just started to battle.

"Well, who's gonna judge this thing? It can't be you. You're his brother. Of course you're gonna say he won."

Warlock looked around and spotted me kicking a rock across the street looking bored and pretending not to be listening to their conversation.

"Yo! Kid! Come here for a sec!"

I walked over, fighting to keep the grin off my face.

"What's up, dog?"

"What's your name, kid?"

"Malik."

"Well, my name is Warlock. This is my brother Nikky, and this fool here is Devin."

"Divinity," he interrupted offering his hand, which I shook without taking my eyes off Warlock.

"Whatever. Anyway, we're about to have a little battle right here and we want you to be our unbiased judge."

"I really don't know that much about rap."

"You know what you like and what you don't. That's good enough."

"Alright, Devin, you go first."

"Ay little homie. Can you do a beat box?"

"A what?"

"Nigga stop stallin' and start flowin'!" Warlock growled.

Warlock started off with some old school tongue twister shit that sounded like a rip-off of Kangol from U.T.F.O. mixed with 2 Live Crew.

"Well, I'm Divinity—In the place to be—I put the girls in ecstasy—every time they see me—rip the microphone like a pair of lace panties—make the girlies scream like I'm all up in their pussy..."

His rap went on and on with that typical B-boy macho misogynistic bravado. Some of it was pretty funny, but none of it was very good. Then Nikky began to flow and what was coming out of his mouth was like nothing I'd ever heard. He was kicking straight poetry.

“Look long and hard—see the heavens scarred—by the impotent tears of a race torn apart— by a prejudice world and our misguided rage—attacking the puppets on a cardboard stage—Now we're stuck in the gloom of our ghetto tomb—and even love to us is just the herald of doom—Who can I trust in this world of fear? What is beauty to the eyes that shed no tears?”

“Yeah, muthafucka! That's what I'm talkin' about, nigga!”

This was the type of genius black folks never got credit for. This kid was probably failing English class yet he could write rhymes with themes, imagery, and rhythms more complex and profound than 99% of the garbage they were teaching us in school. Walt Whitman could kiss my black ass! This was true poetry!

“Man, that wasn't no rap! I-I don't know what the fuck that was!” Devin thought for a second and then shook Nikky's hand, “Yo, but that shit was dope, bro. You got mad skills!”

“Yo, homes that was the freshest shit I ever heard!”

Yeah, I said fresh. That was like '93. You could still say fresh in '93. Couldn't you?

“Fresh?”

“Aaaaaahahaha! That fool said the shit was fresh! Naw, bro. It's dope! It's butta! It's ill! It's sick! But fresh went out with the eighties, son!” Warlock draped an arm around my shoulder still laughing so hard that tears were squeezing out of the corners of his bloodshot eyes.

“Alright, then that shit was sick as fuck!”

“That's my nigga!” Warlock whooped.

Nikky smiled awkwardly at my unselfconscious admiration and seemed to grow even more uncomfortable if that was even possible.

“Yeah, Nikky's got a mind like my nine. Mutherfuckin' cocked and loaded, baby boy. You know he's in that mentally gifted program at school. They got him reading all kinds of ill shit. Philosophy, literature, poetry. That's were he gets most of the material for his rhymes.”

“I knew he didn't make that shit up himself.” Devin declared triumphantly.

“He does make it up himself, fool. The words are his. He just gets the ideas from the books and shit. Fuck am I talkin' to your bitch ass for anyway? You lost, nigga. Now get the fuck up off my car. We outta here, son. Got some business to take care of. You wanna ride along little homie?” Warlock asked, grinning at me with his braces shining in the afternoon sun.

“Sure.”

Warlock slid behind the wheel of the big Lincoln and Nikky and I bounced into the backseat. He pulled out some top paper and a sack of weed the size of a handbag and began rolling a joint. His bony effeminate fingers caressed the rolling papers almost lovingly as he sprinkled the marijuana down into it like a French chef seasoning a soufflé, holding it between thumbs and middle fingers with his index fingers sticking out and up

in the air. He whipped his long narrow tongue along the edge of the paper, gave it several twists to close it, fired it up with a gold zippo lighter, took a long hit, and then passed it to me as he started to cough.

“This is some good shit.” He wheezed between coughs.

All of this happened in what seemed like seconds. I held the joint in my hands and looked over at Nikky who smiled at me and waved me on impatiently. I took a huge hit and immediately began coughing convulsively.

Fifteen minutes later we were all cruising around the hood passing the joint around. It was the first time I had ever gotten high and my head felt like it was filled with helium. My thoughts sloshed around my head in an inarticulate jumble and came out of my mouth the same way.

“Yo, my niggas, we need to get us some of those cheeseburgers from Mickey D’s or some Tasty Kakes or some shit. I’m hungry as a muthafucka! You know they don’t put enough chips in them potato chip bags. They all full of air now. Damn pretzels supposed to be soft, but they hard as a mutherfucka. I don’t want none of them big Jewish pickles neither! They look like Frankenstein’s dick. Pass me that joint, nigga!”

Warlock and Nikky laughed every time I spoke, which made me laugh as well. I was tore up from the floor up, rolling around in the backseat of the Continental, giggling and dropping marijuana ashes all over the brand new blue suede upholstery.

“Fool, don’t you set my seats on fire back there! Pass me that shit before you waste it all!”

Warlock, Nikky, and I started hanging out everyday after that; getting high and composing rap lyrics. Sometimes I would go bombing with them. We would fill our backpacks with Krylon or Rustoleum spray paint stolen from the hardware store. Warlock insisted that we steal it even though he had enough money to buy the store out. That was part of the tradition he said.

“Only toy muthafuckas buy the shit. Real bombers steal it! Guerilla warfare, my nigga! Artistic terrorism!”

We would hit the school yards at both of the neighborhood elementary schools and both Martin Luther King and Germantown High, then we would hop on the back of the SEPTA rail trains, ride them, to the end of the line, and tag trains down in the yard.

Hopping the trains was no joke. Tulpehocken station was a shack that stood behind a plush exclusive retirement home engulfed in a mayhem of lewd, incoherent, iconoclastic, scribblings. Tremendous evergreen trees jutted up twenty or thirty feet in the air on the other side of the tracks and a carefully maintained lawn spread out lavishly from the station to the old folks’ home.

On our side of the tracks was a crumbling parking lot overlooked by dilapidated apartment buildings. White folks from Wissahickon and Black folks from G-town sat together on the benches beneath grafitti that read “Big Mike Rules!” or “Jane sucks dick and drinks cum!” casting nervous glances at one another as they waited to catch the train down to jobs as economically segregated as the neighborhoods they left behind.

It was here that we would come, scrambling over the tracks carrying backpacks filled with stolen Krylon spray paint. The train would thunder down the track with its whistle cutting the calm like a scythe and we would wait for the passengers to climb aboard before sneaking onto the back of the train and holding on for dear life. Mile after

mile the train rambled along, lurching through turns with its iron wheels squealing against the rails and the wind whipping tears from our eyes and splaying them across our cheeks.

We passed through a half dozen different neighborhoods including North Philadelphia, which looked like a post-apocalyptic nightmare where the ozone layer had opened up and scorched the earth to ruin and only the melanin in black skin had allowed for survivors. As the train made its way through and the depressed weather-torn houses with sagging roofs, rotting paint, and shattered windows loomed into view looking worse than the death camps at Auschwitz, the entire train would go silent. This was the roughest, poorest section of Philadelphia marked by hills of garbage, thigh high weeds, packs of soot covered children chasing each other through barren fields of rusted cars and occasionally shooting at one another, miniscule yards filled with trash and savage, half-starved mongrels chained to rusted fences that snarled at us as we rumbled past, and tired old men rocking on front porches while nursing bottles of wine and watching the crackwhores strut past them offering their withered and diseased bodies for less than the price of a happy meal.

The graffiti in this area was mostly gravestones with epitaphs that read “Rest In Peace” and “We Miss You” followed by the names of fallen friends and sometimes graphically illustrated murals depicting the precise manner in which their loved ones had met their end. Guns, knives, needles, and base pipes, told the tale of life’s cessation in that unimaginable hell. Often these murals included threats of retaliation. The entire cycle of violence immortalized on cracked and crumbling brick walls.

As we rode through we tried to imagine living amid that poverty which seemed many times worse than our own and found our minds unequal to the task. North Philly seemed like death not life. It was amazing that anything lived there at all and each child that made it to adulthood was like a miracle. It was inconceivable how these people could survive when most of us barely had a roof over our heads and food on our tables. Silent prayers of thanks would issue from every lip.

“There but for the grace of god go I...”

It was particularly distressing to Nikky and Warlock because they had both been born there and only Warlock’s illegal business activities kept them from tumbling headlong back into that cesspit.

Finally, the train would make its final stop and pull into the trainyard. We would all creep away before the conductor could find us; pulling out our cans of spray paint eagerly hunting for the train upon which we would make our existence omnipresent.

“They want to just tuck us away in the slums and ghettos and forget about us. But see that’s where we come in, the graffiti artists. You go all city with some dope ass mural and now they can’t forget about you. Every time they look up at a wall, a billboard, a subway train, there you are, fuckin’ up the program.”

I wasn’t really much of a graffiti artist. While they were doing burners and wild styles with all kinds of characters in them, I was writing my name in bubble letters. Besides, bombing trains was dangerous as hell. I had already gotten blasted in the back with a shotgun filled with rock salt by one of the security guards in the trainyard and even though it didn’t do any damage it hurt like a motherfucker. A kid from around the way had fallen off and cracked his skull open trying to hop a train down to the yard. And graffiti artists were getting shot by other graffiti artists for “biting their style” almost

every other day. It just didn't seem worth it to me.

Where Nikky and I found common ground was in comic books. I had been reading comic books since I first learned to read and in fact had become such a good reader because of my love of the fantastic tales that filled those pages. I especially identified with the Incredible Hulk; a misunderstood giant constantly persecuted by those who feared and mistrusted him because of his freakish size and strength. That's exactly how I felt back then. At eight years old I was already five feet tall and feared by all the other kids.

Nikky and I used to sit around the house reading comic books for hours at a time and would invite other kids over to trade with us. We would steal comics from the other kids when they weren't looking and pretty soon no one would trust us enough to trade anymore so we just started stealing them from the comic book stores. I was determined to get every Incredible Hulk comic ever made.

When Nikky and I got tired of reading comic books or didn't have the money to buy new ones, and couldn't steal any, we would take a trip down to Wissahickon to steal dirt bikes. Nikky rode on my handle bars all the way down through the park and into the suburbanese white neighborhood on the other side. Over there it was easy pickings. The White kids in Wissahickon didn't even bother to lock their bikes up and often left \$500 designer frames lying on the front lawn. When we spotted one Nikky would jump off my handle bars, snatch up the bike, and ride it as fast as he could all the way back to the hood with me following him running interference in case we were chased. Most of the time we would sell the bikes, but sometimes we would keep them, at least until we came upon something better.

Nikky came up with the idea of decorating our bikes with the silver caps off the air valves on car tires. We would steal them and put them on our bike tires. We got busted for doing that more than anything else. We even got a beating from Mr. Steeltower, a huge gorilla of a man who lived next door with his three equally gargantuan and gruesome sons. All of them were well over six feet tall and two hundred and fifty pounds, black as burnt butter, with greasy Jeri curls. They looked like death on steroids.

We knelt down beside the glossy black Cadillac Biarritz that carried the tremendous Steeltower family through the hood like royalty. Nikky unscrewed the cap on the front tire and I had already removed the one from the back when I heard the wounded cat whine of the rusted screen door opening and froze like a cat caught in the headlights of a speeding semi-truck.

"You boys get up from there! What was ya'll tryin' to steal my rims? You know how much those things cost?" His voice was deep and gravely like the purr of a full-grown male lion. I imagined I could feel it vibrating through the asphalt up through the souls of my feet. Instinctively I braced for an ass-kicking.

"Uh-uh! We wasn't doin' nothing." We replied in chorus, rising from behind the car with guilt smeared conspicuously across our faces. The walrus-like girth of Steeltower filled the doorway like a great living shadow. His massive bulk stretched the seams of a bluish green shark-skin suit. A white cotton polo-shirt open at the neck revealing a thin gold chain hung with an ornate cross covered his bloated stomach and his oily Jeri curl was mashed beneath a white sweat-stained Panama hat. In his hands he clutched a long shotgun that did not divert for an instant from its target—the center of my chest. It had

never even occurred to us to take the rims. Who knows what we could have gotten for them.

“What you got in your hands, boy?”

We opened our hands and the shiny silver air valve caps plinked on the concrete at our feet.

“Ya’ll put those right back where you got them from.”

As we bent down to replace the caps we didn’t notice Steeltower creeping up behind us removing his yard-long belt from its loops until his shadow stifled the sunlight and the first stinging lashes fell across our back and shoulders.

We froze for a second, cringing against the tires of the shiny new Caddy while the belt whipped searing welts on our skin. Finally our brains kicked into gear and we ran like the devil was on our tail.

“Damn kids! Ya’ll just let me catch ya foolin’ with my car again and see what happens to you little niggas!” he yelled after us. He could rest assured that that would never happen.

We sat on the steps of the corner store comparing welts and talking about the hell our parents would visit upon Mr. Steeltower when we told them how he had beaten us with his belt in the middle of the street.

“My Mom will shoot that fat muthafucka right in his fat-ass!”

“When Warlock finds out he’ll probably get so mad he’ll cut his damn balls off!”

Nikky didn’t talk about his parents. They were both drunks and drug addicts who sat around their musty old house drinking MD 20/20 and smoking weed all day.

I told my mom and Nikky told his brother, but nobody did anything. Steeltower was a notorious gun and numbers runner and all three of his sons were killers with rap sheets a mile long. Nobody messed with that family. When I got home I found out that Steeltower had already been there and spoken to my mother. When I opened the door she was standing there with her hands on her hips balled into tight little fists. The cords in her neck were bulging and the vein in the center of her forehead was pulsating. I wound up getting a second beating far more vicious than the first.

“You know that man almost shot you?” she asked as the sole of her shoe worked savagely across my thighs, back, and buttocks.

“The only reason he didn’t pull the trigger was cause he recognized you as my child! Now you march your smart ass back over there and apologize to that man!”

She smacked the shoe against my crying pleading body a few more times; holding me tightly by the arm with her nails leaving half-moons in my bicep as she jerked me around to keep me off balance and open more areas for attack. She was nearly out of breath when she finally released me to comply with her command.

I did as I was told and was surprised to find a grinning friendly Mr. Steeltower who eagerly accepted my apology. He was impressed with my politeness and humility in a time where kids my age were already robbing old folks for their social security checks though he was no doubt aware that all my cockiness had been beaten out of me prior to coming over there. Incredibly, he slipped me a five-dollar bill and told me to come see him if I ever needed anything. I left with a newfound respect for the man. I later found out he was my grandmother’s sometime lover.

Nikky and I were always getting into shit. We used to go down to the

Woolworth's on Germantown and Cheltenham Ave and steal Hot Wheels cars from the toy section.

In our neighborhood Hot Wheels cars were a sort of status symbol. Since nobody around the way actually paid for them, how many cars you possessed was a sign of how accomplished a thief you were. Nikky and I had well over a hundred between us. We would spend hours racing the cars down hills and betting on which ones would make it to the bottom first.

Once we walked into the Woolworth's with the pads from our BMX bikes in our hands. We had intended on unwrapping a few Hot Wheels cars and hiding them inside the pads. We had racked up about six cars each and were on our way out when I noticed the rumpold old, gray-haired, security guard, with the skin-tight high-water uniform on, circling around to intercept us at the exit. I knew he was going to ask to check our pads so I decided to pull a Bugs Bunny move on him. I handed both pads to Nikky and just as the security guard walked up I asked him what time it was. As unbelievable as it sounds, the fool actually stopped and looked at his watch. Nikky slipped safely out the door with the contraband and I stood and waited for the security guard to reply.

"Four o'clock." The grizzled old rent-a-cop answered and I smiled politely, thanking him for the info, and walked out the door leaving him scratching his head and trying to convince himself that he hadn't just been scammed by an eight-year-old. Nobody likes to think they're an idiot even when all evidence points to that conclusion.

Winters in G-town were even more fun than the summers, but only marginally less violent. Right after the first large snowfall the entire neighborhood would rush down to Wissahickon Park to race sleds and inner tubes down Tommy Hill. Tommy Hill was about the length of two city blocks inverted at a seventy-degree angle and dotted with trees and bushes both large and small. My mother would smother me in endless layers of clothing, fill a thermos with hot chocolate, jam my head into a ski mask, earmuffs, and a scarf, which I would get rid of within minutes of leaving the house, and send me off with my rusted old Red Flyer sled to brave the hill.

Beneath my goosedown winter coat, I would be wrapped in Long John underwear, two pairs of pants, a T-shirt, a shirt, two sweaters, and a nylon jacket with a fleece lining. My feet were stuffed into two pairs of socks and plastic bags to keep the moisture out and then packed into huge snow boots that looked like something you'd wear for a walk on the moon. Off I'd speed towards Tommy Hill and there I'd stay 'til I lost all feeling in my extremities and Mom would have to hold my hands and feet under hot water while I screamed and cried as feeling returned in an onrush of white hot pain.

The hill looked like a swarm of ants on an ice-cream cone as kids from all over raced down the hill. The White kids who actually lived in that neighborhood had long ago been driven off after several violent confrontations with some of G-town's hardest. The few that did venture out were quickly relieved of any valuable possessions and sent home with bloody noses, missing teeth, busted lips, or blackened eyes, and sometimes worse. G-town had staked its claim.

Freezing winds scoured our faces, cutting into our skin like icy razor blades as we recklessly careened down the hill catching air and landing in sprays of snow. Inevitably someone crashed into a tree and had to be taken to the hospital, but as soon as the ambulance left we would all start flying down the hill again; careful to steer around the

red snow.

It was rumored that the hill had been named after a kid who'd been killed sledding down it a hundred years ago. I couldn't remember anyone ever dying while we were out there, but bruises, lacerations, and concussions were an everyday thing.

One day during Christmas vacation, after spending hours racing up and down the hill, we were walking home when a bunch of kids who were throwing snowballs at cars on Green Street decided that we would make better targets.

"Get those muthafuckas over there!" one kid yelled and suddenly the sky became a blizzard of frozen projectiles. The snowballs were mostly slush and we were soaking wet in seconds. A short stocky kid with snot running down his face like a fat black soda fountain with a leak picked up a big piece of ice and threw it, hitting Nikky in the face, cutting his lip and bloodying his nose. Nikky started crying and sat down in the snow holding his face. The rest of the kids zeroed in on him and began bombing him with snowballs as he wailed and sobbed and screamed for them to stop. I ran across the street breathless with rage and dove on the short kid. I was pounding the kid's head into the snow when the other boys started kicking and punching me, dragging me off of the snotty nosed boy.

There were more than eight of them and fists and feet struck me from all angles as I swung blindly trying to connect with anything. Out of the corner of my eyes I saw Nikky rush over and fight his way through to my side. They were surprised by Nikky's attack and for a moment it almost looked like they would retreat, then one of them tackled Nikky and they all started stomping and kicking him as he struggled to get up. They ran off and left us both bleeding in the snow freezing half to death. Worst of all, they had stolen our sleds.

I looked at Nikky and he looked at me. We both looked like shit. Black eyes and busted lips. We started to laugh. At that moment we knew that we were truly the best of friends. I had gotten his back when he had needed it and he had gotten my back in return and even though we had both gotten our asses kicked it had been worth it to learn the depths of our friendship.

We never went back to Tommy Hill after that. I couldn't afford a new sled and even though Warlock would have given Nikky anything he wanted, he wouldn't have gone to the hill without me. It was all for the best anyway. A week later they found some Muslim lady buried in the snow up there. She had been pregnant and someone had torn her baby out of her womb. They said it looked like the killer had used his bare hands and teeth to rip out her unborn child. I thought that had to be bullshit. No one was that sick.

Chapter 4

“Hell is other people.”

—Jean Paul Sartre



In school I was always getting into trouble. Even though I made good grades, got perfect scores on all my tests, and did most of my homework, I was constantly getting into fights.

Anyone who dissed me would wind up with missing teeth and because of my raggedy clothes I got dissed a lot until they saw how fearsomely I fought. They started calling me Snap because of my bad temper. Even my teachers called me Snap. My viciousness even caused Nikky to distance himself from me. We hung out around the way, but at school he treated me like a wet food stamp. I understood where he was coming from though. I would have preferred to be anonymous and invisible like him, but he wasn't getting teased like I was. Warlock saw to it that Nikky was never out of fashion. He never wore the same jeans two days in a row. His clothes didn't fit too tight because he'd grown out of them before the income tax return check came. His shoes didn't have holes in them and his jacket didn't have the name of the kid who'd owned it before your mother purchased it from the goodwill written on the inside collar. But for me, with my exhausted retrograde wardrobe, life would have been unbearable if I didn't hold the entire school in fear. Even still their whispered insults shadowed me through the halls as they hurled them silently at my back.

When Tank and Huey transferred to our school, everyone began trying to instigate a war of the hoodrats. They couldn't wait to see us get that shit on.

“Did you see that big muthafucka from North Philly? You know him and Snap ‘gonna wind up thumpin’. I hope he kicks that crazy nigga’s ass! Snap think can’t nobody beat his ass. I can’t wait to see Tank get a hold of ’im.” Every hallway in school echoed with some variation of this same refrain. I wanted to squeeze each and every one of their voiceboxes shut to keep that noise out of my head.

After hearing so much about these new kids from North Philadelphia’s notorious Richard Allen projects, I wanted to see what they were all about. I had already subjugated the entire 5th grade with ease and I wanted to know if their really were two kids that were my match. At that time I considered myself unbeatable. I was eager to fight these two fools and get it over with. They had already tangled with several guys whom I had fought in the past and beaten them just as easily as I had and to be truthful it was making me kind of anxious. When the day finally came it was like high noon in a spaghetti western.

I was on my way to lunch when the biggest blackest kid I could ever remember

seeing lumbered towards me. He was at least 5'5" tall and about 160lbs (which was gigantic for a ten-year-old) and as black as death and sin. He was too solid to be called fat. He seemed to be stuffed full of sand or rocks like my dad's old handmade punching bag and even though his gut stuck out about five inches in front of him nothing on him jiggled. His hair was all nappy and uncombed though he had one of those big wooden brushes sticking out of his back pocket.

His clothes were outdated, ill-fitting, and dirty just like mine, but you could tell he didn't give a fuck just as easily as you could tell that I did. His eyes were big and round with heavy eyelids that covered half his eyes making him look constantly tired or bored. As he lumbered toward me down the hall I could hear his loud ponderous breathing reminding me of the way the shark Darryl had caught once on a deep sea fishing trip had sounded before he clubbed it to death and threw it back overboard. I remember feeling sorry for the shark that day, but right then I kind of wished I had a club myself.

In "The G," and I suspect in every ghetto in Philly if not the entire East Coast, when two males pass each other on the street or in a hallway a contest of wills begins. It's called who will yield and move out of the other one's way. First we look into each other's eyes to assess the degree of threat. If the guy looks away or smiles at you then you hog the entire sidewalk and make him walk on the grass or in the street. But if he mad-dogs you like this big angry thug was doing to me and doesn't give up any ground then it's on and you have to choose whether to be a bitch and back down or be a man and fight. Sometimes you both look at each other and mutually decide that you're too evenly matched and silently consent to both yield a little ground each so that you may pass without bumping shoulders. The entire "contest" takes seconds and happens dozens of times a day, but only rarely results in a fight. There are only so many alpha males and most of the betas know their place. But when Tank came swaggering down the hallway we both knew that neither of us would back down. For no good reason than that it had become my instinct to fight, I put myself even more directly in his path and gave him my hardest look. We slammed into each other chest to chest.

"Nigga is you crazy bumpin' into me! I should kick your fuckin' ass!" Tank bellowed in a voice that sounded way too deep to have come from a kid. He put both his hands on my chest and shoved hard. At first I was amazed and didn't quite know what to do. It had been a long time since anyone had treated me that way. There seemed to be no fear in his heart at all. I stared at him as if I had discovered a new species, then he played himself by pushing me again instead of just flat out punching me. This muthafucka wasn't taking me seriously and was gonna try and embarrass me like some bitch before kicking my ass. It fucked me up cause back then I was the baddest brotha on the block and definitely the baddest thing at that little school. Even the junior high school kids knew that if you fucked with me you'd better protect your neck 'cause I would more than likely be back to stick a blade in it. The only people who didn't know what a terror I was, was Mom, my grandmother and Tank and his brother Huey.

Tank thought he was hard coming from North Philly and all. The brothas down there think everybody else is soft 'cause they ain't on welfare and their moms ain't on crack. But even though we had marginally nicer homes and better schools in G-town, we were still just as poor, just as desperate, and just as mean, and many of us were on welfare and had parents who were hitting the pipe as hard as them fools in the projects. We were

every bit as angry, as bitter and hopeless, as jaded and hardened and lost. In my mind I was going to prove all of that with one punch.

Tank shoved me a second time and I dipped and threw an uppercut to his solar-plexus with all the strength I could muster, a Tyson punch, thrusting upwards with my legs so that I nearly rose off the floor myself. I knew that at 5'3" and less than 100lbs there was no way I was going to knock the much bigger kid out going toe to toe with him but I knew just where to hit to cause the most damage. I figured I could knock the wind out of him and then fuck his shit up while he struggled to catch his breath. He bent over with the punch and I kicked him right in the face trying to shove my worn-out Nike right into his mouth and succeeding in splitting his lip open and cracking a tooth. The huge kid staggered backwards holding his face and I kicked him in his gut like the SWAT team kicking down the door to a drug warehouse, putting all my weight behind it like I was trying to drive right through him. An explosion of air came out of his lungs and he went down on one knee gasping and wheezing as he fought to replenish the oxygen I'd just deprived him of. I leapt on him and began pummeling him with my tiny fists.

There were other kids in the hall now, but I was only peripherally aware of them. They were just shadows dancing and raging at the edge of my sight which was filled only with the tremendous ten-year-old.

"Get 'im! Kill that dirty mutherfucker! Fuck his shit up!"

I didn't know who they were cheering for and didn't care.

Tank lashed out blindly trying to fend off my attack and caught me right between the eyes with the back of his fist. Blue lights flashed in my skull and I staggered backwards. That's when Tank got up. I'd never seen a kid come back after a beating like that and my eyes widened in surprise and fear. It was like watching Micheal Meyers or Jason Vorhees rise up after being stabbed, shot, and burned to death. It seemed supernatural and damn did he look pissed.

He charged me and swung a right at my head. I leaned back to avoid the blow and he swung a left uppercut into my gut. Just to pay me back I supposed. Air evacuated my lungs in a great rush and my eyes teared up. The whole world seemed to shift as pain overwhelmed my senses. It took everything I had to remain standing. I turned away from him and he punched me in the back so hard I thought my spine would snap. Another blow struck me in the back of the head and the light bulbs flashed in my skull once more.

I wanted to black out. My body wanted to sink to the floor and succumb to the painlessness of dreams, but instead I kicked at his unprotected head with some fake-ass Bruce Lee move as he charged me again and shocked myself by connecting, catching him on the ear and knocking him face first into the wall. There was a sickening wet "Smack!" and a great splatter of blood sprayed across the wall. This big, black, mean-ass thug screamed when he saw his own blood and ran past me, down the hall, to the principle's office. The motherfucker was going to drop dime on me.

In no mood to face the principle, I decided to skip out. I pushed past all the spectators who had gathered to watch the gladiatorial games and slammed through the fire door setting off alarms and not giving a fuck.

I started running and was halfway home when I realized that I couldn't go home at noon without my grandmother getting suspicious and calling the school. So I took a detour and went to the library. It was the only place you could go during school hours and

not get questioned.

Northwest Regional Library was one of the newest and nicest libraries in the city. It amazed me that it was right in the middle of Germantown. In the children's section they had a big wooden sculpture of a dragon that was almost twenty feet long and upstairs they had computers and thousands of books. I loved this place.

I checked out a book on Shaka Zulu and sat enthralled for hours reading about how he'd nearly taken over all of Africa. I felt as if I had been born at the wrong time and in the wrong place. On the plains of Africa I felt like they would have appreciated my skills, my ferocity, my aggression. I would have become a great general in Shaka's army or maybe even a king myself. Here, I was just a thug who would no doubt wind up in prison someday.

I read the entire book in a few hours and then made my way back over to the shelves and picked up a book I'd never seen before, but whose title called out to me just as it was meant to do. It was called "A Message to the Black Man in America" by some cat named Elijah Muhammed. I checked it out and started reading it as I took the bus back home.

It was almost five o'clock in the evening when I made it home. I walked past all the kids playing in the street and all anyone was talking about was how I'd kicked Tank's ass and how his older brother Huey had been around looking for me. I had only read the first ten pages of Elijah Muhammed's book, but already there were thoughts in my head of black unity and how the social diseases of poverty, racism, and oppression had corrupted our brains and made us self-destructive creatures who fed on one another turning all our rage and hatred inward rather than turning that aggression outward towards our oppressors. Old habits die hard though.

"Shit, I don't give a fuck! I'll kick his ass too! Them North Philly niggas ain't shit!" I said boldly and loudly. Too loudly in fact 'cause my grandma overheard me.

"Is that you cussin' like that Malik? Boy, you'd better get your fresh behind in here 'fore I take this belt to your hide!" Sometimes I wished she was half deaf like most other grandmothers. But at forty-seven years old she was the youngest grandmother I knew.

"Did you hear me boy? Get your bad behind in here! I want you to clean up that filthy room of yours before your momma gets home and has a fit!"

"Damn!" I said under my breath as I skulked up the steps and into the house.

Grandma could talk real mean sometimes, but it was all a front. Deep down she was as soft and sweet as cotton candy. She just yelled when she was lonely, just to get attention. I don't know why my mother couldn't see that. It was probably 'cause she was so stressed out from working all day and, in her words, "Takin' shit from white folks."

I went inside and Grandma was all over me as soon as I stepped through the door.

"Where've you been boy?"

"I went to the library after school."

I put the book down on the kitchen table and Grandma's eyes zeroed in on it then seemed to stay fixed on the book. She stared back at me in shock like I'd just set a decapitated head on the table instead of a book.

"You got that at the library?" She asked.

"Yeah."

“Who told you about this book?” she asked.

“Nobody. I just saw it sitting on the shelf and it looked interesting.”

“Mmmhmm.” She replied and then turned away from both me and the book.

“Well, get upstairs and clean that nasty room of yours.”

I went to work on her.

“But, I’m starving, Grandma. Do I have to wait for Mom to get home to get something to eat?”

“You didn’t look that hungry when you was outside runnin’ that filthy mouth of yours.”

“Them boys was sayin’ some kid from North Philly was gonna beat me up.”

“Who’s gonna beat you up, boy? What have you done now?” There was worry and concern on her face. It wasn’t just me getting into a fight that scared her. It was that around our way fights had a way of turning deadly.

“I ain’t did nothin’. This kid just wants to fight me ’cause he wants to prove he can beat me. I don’t even know the kid.” That seemed to relax her a little. This was just typical adolescent machismo and not the type of thing kids got murdered for. It was much better than her knowing that I’d trashed the kid’s brother and he was out looking for revenge. She’d have worried herself sick if she knew that. Just like I was doing.

“Well, ain’t nobody gonna beat you but me if you don’t clean up that room. Ain’t nobody gonna lay a finger on you as long as I’m around.”

I loved hearing her say it, but even she knew that parents couldn’t protect me from everything. That life was bigger and stronger than Mom or Dad or even Grandma. Some kids make it all the way through college before they learned those lessons. But those kids never lived in the ghetto.

“Do I have to clean my room now? I’m hungry grandma.” I made the most pitiful face I could muster and could see grandma’s resolve melting like an ice-cream castle.

“Lord, child you gonna be the death of me. Don’t them people feed you at school?”

“That food is nasty! I don’t eat that mess!”

“Well, you sure got fine tastes for a little boy with no job and no money. Get in there and do your homework while I make you a sandwich. And don’t tell me you ain’t got none ’cause I know better.”

“Oh, alright.”

I picked the book up off the table and marched with it into the family room. Out of the corner of my eye I could see Grandma’s eyes latch onto the book and follow it out of the room. Now I was really curious. What was it about this little book that made her so afraid?

Grandma went shuffling into the kitchen to scrape the meat off some left-over chicken legs to make me a sandwich and I sat down at the huge ornate dining room table that would have been a gorgeous antique in a nicer home but in ours, covered with cheap plastic placemats that smelled like airplane glue, it was just another piece in a cluttered maze of junk.

I opened the book by Elijah Muhammed and began to read about Dr. Yacub and how the white man was the devil. I laughed as I thought about it. All the white boys I knew were far too soft to be devils. They were more like those bitch-ass cherubs in the

renaissance paintings at the art museum. Then again I hadn't been a slave nor had I been forced to deal with the degradation of the Jim Crow laws as most Black people did back when this book was written. Poverty was the only burden that Black people today had to bear and it seemed that much of it was our own doing. Dropping out of school, having babies at 15 years-old, getting thrown in prison before we could legally vote, voiding our minds with drugs, men abandoning their families to start new ones over and over again without supporting any of the children they produced. I didn't see the devil involved in any of that. I saw our own self-destructive ignorance. Even my own family seemed to have a fear of success, afraid to risk everything to go for their dreams, but rather content to stay in the ghetto and complain about what they didn't have.

Even Grandma could have gone back to school if she wanted to. I'd heard of lots of middle-aged people who went to college to try to better themselves. Every day I heard my mother and grandmother complaining about the depressed economy and non-existent job market in Philadelphia, but yet they stayed here suffering, too afraid to leave the comfort and familiarity of the goddamned block. I made a promise to myself that I was going to get the fuck out of Philly the first chance I got. I tossed the book aside and started my math homework.

All of a sudden I heard loud voices cussin' and arguing outside. One of the voices was speaking in an almost indecipherable Jamaican patois' and the other was speaking in the most exaggerated ghetto slang I'd ever heard. I could barely understand either of them.

"What! Nigga, what! You betta act like you know and stop slangin' that shit on my turf 'cause I know you don't want no drama from me, fool!"

"Go on bloodclot! Lickle peckerwood wannabe! Jah Warrior say 'ow tings go down 'ere and 'e say ya naw can claim nut'ing in G-town. Ya wan' sell in G-town ya 'ave ta pay! Dis 'ere Jah Warrior territory! Now go on way from 'ere for I take it in my mind ta stop ya breat'ing!"

"You know who you steppin' to fool? This here is Scratch! I ain't nuthin' ta play with, son! I ain't nuthin' nice! You think shit is sweet up in this piece? You think you can run up in here and take my shit?"

I had run to the window when I heard the dread refer to his adversary as a peckerwood because I just couldn't imagine a white boy in our neighborhood, talking cold street, and stepping to one of those ruthless Jamaican dealers like he was some bitch.

Just as I parted the blinds enough to see the two, this tall skinny white boy in a leather Nike running suit, a thick gold "dope rope" with a gold nameplate that read "Scratch", and more lines carved into the side of his towering block taper than Vanilla Ice, drew a big shiny automatic pistol out of his waistband while the Jamaican reached for his and blew the rasta's dreadlocks off his head along with the greater portion of his skull. His crown of thick dreads went spinning through the air looking for a moment like some type of grisly gore-streaked Christmas tree.

I sat frozen at the window watching the emaciated scarecrow-like Jamaican whose eyes had burned like Moses slip to the ground with blood streaming out of his nostrils and ears and his brain flopping out of the top of his ruptured head. His body hit the ground with a soft thud and then a smack as his head struck the asphalt and his brains spilled out onto the street. His legs were still twitching and his fingers were clenching and

unclenching. The white boy stepped up and put two more bullets into him silencing his restless corpse. I was transfixed.

It was the first time I had seen anyone die in real life and several hundred thousand TV and movie murders hadn't prepared me. This was not killing it was butchering. It was like watching videos of deer being gunned down for sport. Yet where those videos made me sad and angry, this left me feeling hollow, helpless, vulnerable, and then suddenly excited! If this white boy could take a life away so easily than so could I! To me it was like witnessing the power of a god. Then the white boy knelt down over the bleeding carcass and did something that no god I'd ever heard of would ever have done.

A pink spaghetti-like mass of tissue oozed between the white boy's fingers as he reached into the Rasta's skull and scooped out his brain. I stared in shocked silence, my body shaking and the little hairs on the back of my neck standing on end, watching as he crammed the man's brain into his mouth, gulping and swallowing like a snake swallowing a rat. I kept watching as he slid his fingers along the inner wall of Jah Warrior's brain pan and brought two fingers dripping with blood and cerebral fluid up to his lips where he licked them clean, shuddering as if in the throws of orgasm. He smeared his face in the blood flowing from the dead guy's head like war paint, a horrible grin scarring his features. If I'd been forced to describe Satan...that was the face I would have given him.

"Jesus Christ!"

I was terrified, but not nearly as much as I should have been. I know it seems bizarre now, but at the time I didn't see anything at all unnatural about what he'd done. I even thought I could remember seeing something on National Geographic about a tribe in Africa that ate the brains of their enemies in order to gain their power but I couldn't be sure. I guess I just figured that he was playin' that crazy nigga role to build his rep and scare off witnesses and competition. Who would fuck with some crazy white boy who talked like a thug and ate motherfucker's brains?

"Ya'll niggas ain't see shit! Say you saw somethin' and see what happens! See what I do to you! See what happens to your families!"

He was standing in the middle of the street, waving his gun with one hand while wiping the blood and brainmatter from his mouth and chin with the back of his other hand.

I couldn't believe what I had seen. I thought about the book I had just started reading and what Elijah Muhammed had said about the White man being the devil. I still wasn't so sure about the white man being the devil but I was almost positive that this one was.

I heard my grandmother's footsteps moving faster than I ever would have thought they could and then I felt myself being hurled to the floor. She was praying and sweating and scared. I was scared too but I was also impressed. At that moment the white boy with the big shiny gun and the cannibalistic appetite loomed larger than life. A white kid who could walk into a ghetto by his damned self and gun down a member of one of the most vicious drug gangs around, in broad daylight, and then stroll right back out unmolested and unmarred. Here was a muthafucka who didn't give a fuck. He was obviously insane, eating a niggas brains like it was a damned cheese steak hoagie, but that type of crazy just

made you more dangerous by my way of thinking. I didn't care if he was Satan or not. I wanted to be just like him. I would be and much worse.

My mom made me stay in all night because of the shooting so I didn't have to face Huey, but I knew there was no avoiding him at school. I was tempted to stay home but I also knew that everyone would know it was because of Huey and I didn't want all the kids to call me a pussy. Mom still had one of Darryl's guns around the house somewhere and with yesterday's drama still fresh in my mind I considered confronting Huey with it. Even then the thought of murdering someone didn't bother me one bit. I wasn't planning on eating the nigga's brains like that white boy but I'd damn sure peel his cap back if I had too. But I didn't want to think of what would happen to me if I got caught. I liked the idea of walking the streets with the reputation of being a killer but I hated the idea of walking the prison yard for the rest of my life. Besides, I wasn't certain I could find it anyway. Mom was a master at hiding things she didn't want me to get a hold of.

As soon as I left the house the other kids walking past on their way to school all turned to look at me. Then they looked back around the corner on Duval Street at something I couldn't see. I knew that the something was probably Huey or Tank or both of them. I steeled my nerves and stepped on down the street strolling like I was the hardest nigga on the planet.

Iesha, this little red-bone girl who lived up the street from me, came rushing up to me and grabbed my hand. I had a crush on her and she knew it, but fronted like she was naïve. I knew she liked me too, but her mom thought I was a little hoodlum so she had to keep her distance. Her mom would kick her ass at the drop of a dime, even in public. Her hand in mine sent shivers through me and when I turned to look into her light brown eyes all thoughts of Huey fled from me.

"Oh, hi Iesha. What's up?"

"Don't you know?"

"Oh, I know about that shooting last night. The shit happened right in front of my crib. I watched the ambulance take the body away." Even at ten I knew better than to admit to anyone that I had witnessed a murder. Especially when the killer was a psychotic white man who ate brains.

"No, I mean about Huey sayin' he's gonna kick your ass! He's right around the corner with his brother. You should go back in the house 'fore they catch you!"

The concern and worry in her voice, the fear on her face, wounded me. Didn't she think I could take care of myself? Shit, I ran that school and had kicked more ass than any ten kids and here she was telling me to run?

"Before they catch me? Bitch, do you see me runnin'! Ain't no bitch ass North Philly pussy's gonna kick my ass!"

I said it loud enough for all the kids on the block to hear along with anyone who might have been waiting around the corner, then I stormed down toward Duval Street hungry for blood. All the kids followed a few steps behind me like vultures circling carrion, leaving Iesha standing alone in the middle of the street still looking worried for me. I was going to beat this Huey kid 'til he lay bleeding at my feet for making Iesha doubt me.

The air parted reluctantly as I charged through it. It was so thick with tension that running through it was like swimming through quicksand. All that did was make me even

more desperate to get it all over with. I still had not learned fear yet.

I was at the end of the block in seconds looking for the pretender who had come to usurp my crown as king of the block. I turned at Duval Street and didn't see anyone but a bunch of second graders being walked to school by a woman too young to be any of their mothers. Just as I was about to sigh in relief and talk some trash to the other kids about scaring them off, Tank's hulking bulk turned the corner from McCallum Street onto Duval followed by a little light-skinned kid who was almost pretty enough to be a girl.

Huey was all of 4' 8" and no more than 90lbs. His skin was butterscotch and he had big hazel eyes with long lashes, thick bushy eyebrows that rose to sharp peaks, and curly hair that grew in an unruly bush. My grandmother later referred to him as "That high-yaller nigga with the good hair."

When I saw him come walking down the street led by his behemoth "Little brother", whom I'd already sent hobbling to the principle's office the day before sniffing and crying with blood and snot dried and caked beneath his nose. I nearly burst out laughing. There was Tank with his nose all bandaged up, grinning like an idiot, walking alongside his "Big" brother who looked like you could knock him over with a few harsh words. I knew a lot of short kids who were bad as fuck but none of them were as pretty as this kid. He looked like a mark to me. I couldn't imagine anyone who looked that feminine kicking my ass, but that just showed the limits of my imagination.

He stepped up to me and I puffed out my chest and said "So, you're Huey, huh?" His eyes met mine and I knew I had made a mistake. I knew that this little yaller nigga was dangerous. He had eyes like Darryl had after returning from 'Nam, eyes like my uncle had when we used to visit him at Gratersford prison before he was shot by a guard, eyes like that white boy who shot that Jamaican yesterday, eyes that have seen the worst the world had to offer, eyes that had seen lots of killing, eyes that have killed. We all look like that now, but back then you didn't see eleven year-old boys with eyes like hardened cons.

Huey didn't say a word as he stepped up. He just kicked me right in the jaw with a move every bit as graceful and beautiful as himself. This was no Kung fu Theatre bullshit either. This little brotha new what he was doing. I felt my jaw pop and then a punch landed on the other side of it that felt like it would rip my head in two. Instantly I flew into a rage, throwing myself at the little pretty boy in a rage, but I couldn't land a single blow.

Huey slipped and ducked and weaved, while firing counter shots in rapid combinations. My blows were wild and flailing whereas his were precise and accurate. As his punches landed again and again my rage started to give way to fear. I couldn't even see the punches coming and once they began they were like an endless wave of kicks. Knees, elbows, and hooks. He was taking me apart. I felt myself starting to lose consciousness so I did the only thing I could at that point to save myself. I ran. Hearing the kids behind me laughing, hearing Iesha's pained voice calling my name, hearing my father's disappointed hiss echoing in my mind more painful and intimate than the rest. I ran home and ransacked Mom's room looking for Darryl's gun. If I had found it Huey and I would have never become friends. If I had found it Huey and Tank would have never become anything but dust and stench.

Grandma rushed upstairs when she heard me dismantling Mom's room. She found

me sitting in Mom's closet with tears streaming down my face and blood and saliva drooling from my mouth, which hung carelessly open. My cheeks were swollen up like two puss-filled blisters about to rupture. She screamed and hugged me, and prayed, and dragged me to the hospital begging and praying to God all the way.

They wired my jaw shut and I adamantly refused to go back to school looking like some freak whose braces had been welded together. I stayed home reading Elijah Muhammed's book and thinking about what I'd seen that white boy do to that Jamaican dealer. The more I thought about it the more amazing it seemed. I'd never even heard about white boys that hard. Except maybe the mafia but I didn't think this guy was Italian. He looked too pale. And I'd never heard of anyone from the mafia eating anyone's brains. It just didn't add up. It didn't make sense.

Why would someone eat a niggas brains? Was he trying to claim that Rasta's spirit or his power like those African tribes or was he just trying to establish some kind of weird-ass rep?

It didn't add up at all unless of course he really was some kind of demon. I kept thinking about the way his face had looked after he'd peeled that Jamaican's cap back and scooped out Jah Warrior's brains, all covered in blood with flesh and brain matter coating his gold teeth. His eyes had filled with something like ecstasy. There was definitely something not right about that white boy. He looked like he was possessed or something. But Elijah Muhhamed had said that all white people were demons. Did all of them do shit like that? I wasn't sure. I just didn't know enough about them.

I started making it a point to question every Muslim I saw about white people and that whole devil thing.

"No, brother. You got it all wrong. There ain't no one white man walking around who's the devil like they portray him in the white man's bible. He ain't got horns and tail or nothing like that. *All* white men are the devil. Every last one of them collectively make up that fork-tongued cloven-hoofed fiend. He is an amalgamation of evil and the white man is that evil."

His name was Jihad Ali and he was selling bean pies by the side of the road, dressed in a dark suit, white shirt, and red bow-tie. His head was clean-shaven and his face was serious but friendly. He'd been only too eager to talk to me when I walked up to him with my mouth still full of wires and started asking him about white people.

"See, the white man is the original trickster, the deceiver. He was created by an evil scientist named Dr. Yaccub in order to bring down the Black man from his throne of power and enslave him. That's why we have to separate ourselves from these devils in order for our people to rise again. As long as we are living among them we are corrupted by their evil."

"Do they all eat niggas brains?"

"No, they don't eat your brain literally. They are parasites that eat your soul. They eat away at you every day by making you feel like less of a human being. They keep us poor and pump our neighborhoods full of drugs and alcohol and fried foods and pork to eat away at our spirits."

Jihad's eyes sparkled when he talked, the way my grandma's did when she talked about Jesus.

"Then what about what I saw?"

“Maybe it was a hallucination or maybe you had a psychic premonition or something. Maybe you had a vision of what all white people are really like underneath.”

But it wasn't all white people. That drug dealer wasn't the first white person I'd ever seen but he was the first one I'd ever seen who killed niggas like that and ate their brains. I'd heard about the KKK and the Nazis and those White folks who'd brought my ancestors over from Africa in slave ships. They could have all been devils. But none of them ate black folk's brains, at least not from what I had heard. That white boy was the first white person who'd ever scared the shit out of me.

I started having nightmares about getting my head blown off and being eaten alive. I soon found myself looking suspiciously at every white person I passed. Then, when I heard about Jeffrey Dahmer getting arrested and thrown in prison for eating a bunch of Black and Hispanic kids, I started to think that maybe Jihad had been right and they were all devils. Still, it didn't make sense to me. If they were all out there killin' niggas and eatin' their brains there wouldn't be no niggas left in the world, definitely not in America. Maybe that's why we were still the minorities despite all the fucking that went on in the ghetto? Maybe white people were killing us off and gobbling us up as fast as we could make new babies? I thought about my teachers at school and I just couldn't imagine it. They all seemed so nice. No, there was definitely something different about that White boy.

I missed a month of school following my run in with Huey but I got that nigga back.

Even though I was staying home from school I couldn't let the other kids think it was because I was afraid. So, the next day, I left my house early and hid in an alley on Duval street between Ambrose and Burbridge streets. I picked up half a cinder block and a big piece of lumber. I waited, watching all the kids walk by on their way to school. I listened to many of them discuss how Huey had beaten me. My rage seethed within me like something alive and dangerous. Something hungry and violent. I waited until finally I saw Huey walk by. I expected to see just him and Tank and was floored with shock and grief when I saw Iesha strolling along right beside Huey, holding hands. I raised the chunk of cinder block above my head just as he passed then I stepped out of the alley behind him and brought it down on his skull with a crack that sprayed blood into the air like a geyser.

Iesha screamed and looked at me like I was some kind of monster. I wanted to punch her right in the mouth for betraying me like that, but I hadn't been raised to hit girls. Still, when she charged me looking like she wanted to scratch my eyes from my face, I had no choice but to push her down, though I did so as gently as I could. Tank came roaring up behind me next. I turned in time to crack him upside the head with the stick I still held. He fell and clutched his head, more to ward off further blows than to ease the pain of the first strike, but I was done. I stared at Iesha who glared back at me murderously then I dropped the stick and walked back through the alley to my house. I was upset that Iesha had chosen Huey over me and that sapped all of my rage leaving only a hollow emptiness. I had gotten a little revenge on Huey and Tank, but apparently they had still won because they had the girl I loved.

My reputation was saved. I got phone calls all day from kids congratulating me on smashing up the two brothers. Huey and Tank would have to wait a while if they wanted

to retaliate now because I was still not scheduled to go back to school for a month. But there would be no retaliation. Huey and Tank's Mom came to my house that night to speak to my Mom about her son's busted head.

"Excuse me, Miss Black, but you have a son named Malik don't you?"

"Yes, I do. Why do you want to know?" my mother asked, looking over the woman's shoulder at the bandage on Huey's head and the big welt in the center of Tank's forehead and already guessing what had happened.

Mom towered over Huey's mom, who was only 5'4" and gunmetal black like Tank. I wondered how such a dark complexioned woman could have a kid as light as Huey. Even though my Mom was taller, their mother had muscles like a man and even wore her hair shaved close to the scalp like a man. She looked as formidable as her offspring and when she spoke it was low and raspy like that dry heat that wheezed out through the vents from those dusty old heating systems we all had. She was pit-bull ugly though and her eyes were mean. Looking at her I thought of what Huey had done to me and wondered if this little woman could do the same thing to my mom. I wasn't really worried though. I knew that dad's gun was still somewhere in the house and that Mom knew how to use it. He had shown her how.

"Your son hit my kid upside the head with a brick and he had to get thirteen stitches to sew it back up!"

"Whoa, before you start accusing my boy of anything you should know that that little heathen of yours broke my boy's jaw and now he can't even go to school because his mouth is wired shut and he can't speak!"

"Who the hell are you calling a heathen?"

I sat in the living room listening to all of this and praying that the two women didn't wind up fighting because of me.

Huey and Tank's Mom may have been ugly but she had the body of a porn star. I'd never seen breasts so large on a woman so small. Despite the absence of a bra, they seemed to defy gravity. The nipples jabbed at the fabric of her shirt like little brown darts and half of her breasts swelled out from the sides of her tank-top. Her thin waist tapered down to wide full hips and an ass that was like a basketball that had been split into two equal parts and suspended high on her strong back. Her legs were as powerfully muscled as her arms and shoulders. She was built like an Olympic sprinter. Her deep chocolate skin glistened like it had been dipped in oil making her body look even more delicious. My young manhood strained against my jeans as I took her all in. Even with that mulish face she was beautiful. I wondered again how a woman with a face like that could have born a kid as comely as Huey.

As our mothers talked, Tank came walking up with a chocolate ice-cream bar that was dripping down his hand. He bit chunks out of it and chewed them up like a regular meal. In seconds the ice-cream was gone and Tank was licking the remaining chocolate from his pudgy fingers. It struck me then how much he looked like any other fat kid and not the fearsome bully who was terrorizing the whole school. Huey didn't look like a kid at all though. He looked like the leading man in a romantic movie, but miniaturized.

It was weird, but, watching the two of them standing there huddled around their mother, I found myself wanting to know more about them. I wanted to be their friend. I saw how they stared at my Mom, who I knew was a stunning beauty, and I knew how I

could keep our moms from fighting and maybe even establish a friendship with the two thugs. I ran outside to stand by my mother's side.

"...I don't care what you say my kid did. It was your kid who—"

"It was my fault." I mumbled through my locked jaws, interrupting the two women whose tempers were just beginning to rise.

"What did you say?" my mom asked, as if unable to believe what she was hearing. It was hard for me to speak with my jaws wired shut and she was obviously hoping that she had misinterpreted my muffled mumbling.

"I started it!" I yelled and this time there was no mistaking what I had said. "I wanted to see if they were as tough as everyone was saying they were and they are. Nice kick man. That shit still hurts. You'll have to show me how to do that sometime. I don't want to fight them no more, but after Huey broke my jaw I couldn't go out lookin' like no punk. So I had to do what I had to do, you know, to maintain my rep. I didn't really mean to hurt him."

Everyone was amazed. Even though they could barely hear most of what I was saying, I could tell they had heard enough. Huey's mom didn't know what to say and the two boys looked dumbfounded. My mom was about to say something when I cut her off by stepping right up to Huey and holding out my hand.

"My fault, man. We friends now or what?"

Huey stared at my hand like something that had floated up from the bottom of a toilet. His face went from amazement to disgust then to rage and then back to wonder.

"Are you fucking kidding me, man?"

"Go ahead and shake his hand, boy! Black folks ain't got no business fighting each other. I done told you that time and again. Now you two make up!"

Huey looked at his mother as if he was about to argue the point, but then he decided it wasn't worth the effort. He stepped forward and shook my hand, giving me a look to let me know that if this was some kind of trick then I was as good as dead. I smiled as big as I could with my wired jaw and pumped his fist. He returned the smile with a nervous confused version that was full of unanswered questions. Savoring this minor victory, I stepped up to Tank and held out my hand. To my surprise he took my hand into his huge paw with no reservations and shook it enthusiastically, a broad grin breaking open across his face.

"Looks like I owe you an apology, Mrs. Turner." My mother whispered bashfully.

"I'm sure there's more to this story than either of us will ever know. No apologies needed. And call me Charlotte."

"Then at least let me have the three of you over for supper?"

"Only if you can tell me where to find some weed in this neighborhood? I've only been here a couple of weeks and I don't know nobody yet."

"I got some shit you should try then. If you like it then I'll tell you where you can get hooked up. Come on in."

As unlikely as it would have seemed, a day after hospitalizing each other, Charlotte Turner and her two warrior sons became my new best friends. Our mothers soon became interchangeable. So much so that when we brought home a bad report card we were just as likely to get punished by one as the other and sometimes by both. Even though I was tall and skinny, my appetite was every bit as ravenous as Tank's and

sometimes we would eat dinner at his house and then run over to my house and have dinner again.

The three of us became the terrors of our school and neighborhood. We were like our own little gang and used to extort the kids at school for their money, sneakers, jewelry, jackets, anything we wanted and they had.

I found out why Huey looked so different from his brother too. Huey and Tank had different fathers. Tank's dad was another victim of the war in Vietnam. He had come back from 'Nam a hopeless heroin addict who discovered, like so many others, that where the drug had been cheap and plentiful during the war, stateside it was worth more than lives. He fathered Tank just months before getting himself killed in a convenience store hold-up.

Huey never knew his Dad and his mother only knew him for a few painful hours.

Back in 1985, Charlotte Turner was snatched off the corner and whisked away in a patrol car for no apparent reason other than being a Black woman selling Black Panther newspapers at a time when militant black organizations were no longer in vogue. There were two cops in the car that day. "I Spy" cops. One white and one black.

The black cop was in the driver's seat when they pulled the police cruiser alongside her. Charlotte stood on the corner wearing a black beret over her afro, a black leather coat and bellbottomed jeans.

"What are you supposed to be? Public Enemy or something? You trying to fight the power?"

"Fuck you pig!"

"Fuck me? No, bitch. Fuck you!"

The black cop leapt out of the car and smacked the newspapers out of her hand. The white cop slipped up behind her and jerked her arms behind her back. Charlotte fought them when they tried to handcuff her.

"What am I being arrested for? If I'm under arrest then read me my rights. I demand to know why I'm being arrested!"

"Bitch, you ain't got no rights! Now are you going to resist?"

They began punching her and then cracking her across the thighs and buttocks with their nightsticks until her protests subsided. They nearly broke her arm getting the handcuffs on, twisting it behind her back and wedging a nightstick between her shoulder and elbow then wrenching up on it until she cried out. When she screamed and kicked the white officer pulled the club out from behind her and cracked her across the face with it. Her left eye still droops from that blow.

Once cuffed, he slid her limp bleeding body further into the vehicle and slid in beside her. He slammed the door and ordered the Black cop to drive off. Instead of driving to the police station they drove down to the train station at the end of Tulpehocken Street and took turns raping her while the other held her down.

Charlotte remembers looking up while the white cop was grunting and groaning inside her, poisoning her womb with his vile seed, and seeing the other cop, who looked like he could have been a relative, holding her arms over her head and urging the white cop on to a faster climax so that he could have his turn. When both of them had spent themselves inside of her, they raped her again, with their nightsticks. They then threw her exhausted body onto the railroad tracks assuming she wouldn't have the strength to drag

herself to safety before the train came to finish the job they had begun. But Charlotte had the strength and she passed that strength on to the son they'd planted in her belly, Huey, the son of her rapist, who she named after Huey Newton the Supreme Servant of the Black Panther Party who he remarkably resembled. She also passed on her newfound passion for the martial arts and her hatred of anything white. When I talked to her about what Elijah Muhammed said in his book about the White man being the devil she was quick to agree. I was smart enough to know that her opinion was biased though.

Huey was a shy skinny kid who was so pretty you would have thought he was queer if he wasn't so damned spooky. The kid never smiled. He was like a man trapped inside a boy's body. Whereas Tank looked like a pro-wrestler in miniature, Huey looked like he should have had a guitar in his hands rather than a knife or a gun. Everyone our age was scared to death of Huey and with good reason.

By the time we all became friends, Huey had already killed another kid in a fight and had just barely avoided juvenile detention, squeaking by on a self-defense plea. His Jui-Jitsu instructor had helped by testifying that Jui-Jitsu was strictly a defensive art and only works to counter attacks. No one else in the courtroom knew enough about Martial Arts to notice that the moves he'd used on the kid had not come from Jui-Jitsu but rather from Muay Thai kickboxing, a brutal offensive art. Luckily, his Muay Thai instructor had not been present to testify.

The more I got to know Huey the more I realized how lucky I had been to have escaped our fight with just a broken jaw. He'd been known to break people's arms and legs in fights. Who knows what might have happened if I hadn't run away. The only time I ever saw Huey smile was when I asked him what he might have done to me that day.

I pitied Huey as much as I admired him. He seemed to be perfectly bred for the streets. He was cold and hard, so tormented by the demons in his soul that the horrors on the streets couldn't phase him. He walked around like he was just barely aware of the ground under his feet. Even when he was fighting it was like he was barely interested in what he was doing. His eyes always had that far-away look.

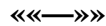
I don't think I've ever seen him afraid, but then I can't ever really remember seeing him happy either. Anger or indifference seemed to be the only emotions he was capable of. Most of my viciousness back then was done mostly just to stay ahead of him. I mean, I couldn't have fools more afraid of him than me. So, where Huey was fast, clean, and efficient, I was cruel and creative and would brutalize and torture anyone who fucked with me in the most gruesome ways I could think of. Tank once threw up watching me cut the ears off a fifteen year-old boy who had beaten and robbed this little retarded kid named Nate who wasn't even quite nine yet. I was twelve. That was the same year we met Scratch face to face and also the year my father came back.

Chapter 5

*“The poor have become our creators.
The black. The thoroughly ignorant.
Let the combination of morality
And inhumanity begin...”*

—Amiri Baraka,

“Short Speech to My Friends”



Mom and Grandma were fighting a lot around that time. My mom had started dating again and my Grandma was none too pleased about that. She would call her a slut and say she neglected me. I guess I was partially to blame for it; getting in trouble so much and always bugging my grandmother for snack money, insisting that I was starving. My mom was miserable and I think she went out just to get away from Grandma and maybe even from me too. Whenever she tried to stay home and do what Grandma wanted it was even worse.

“What kind of job you got that you gotta leave heah at six o’clock in the morning and don’t get back ’til six o’clock at night, then still have enough energy to run the streets all night?”

“I don’t run around in the streets all night.”

“Well you damned sure ain’t here taking care of your responsibilities! That boy of yours is half starved all the time. In the streets all hours of the day and night with no supervision. You know what goes on in them streets? If it wasn’t for me you’d probably find him dead somewhere or locked up or on drugs. But I ain’t his mama. That’s your job! People gonna say the boy’s some kind of hoodlum, in the streets all the time, and you know what they gonna say about you. The way you run around it’s no wonder his daddy left.”

“His daddy ain’t leave! You know damn well that I left Darryl and you know why! Malik is well fed and well supervised he just fools you into giving him more money so he can buy junk food that he knows I don’t want him havin’. And the only one who questions my ability to raise a child is you. If it was up to you I’d still be getting my ass kicked by Darryl and then you’d have something to say about that!”

It would go on like that for hours until Mom would finally call one of her boyfriends and disappear for the night. Then one night there was a knock on the door.

“Baby? It’s me. Let me in. We have to talk.”

It was Darryl, my father. He was back and he wanted us back with him. He moved

around the corner from us and came by everyday bringing Mom money and flowers and jewelry. He even brought toys for me. Pretty soon, under pressure from Grandma, Mom forgave him and we moved back in with him under promises that there would be no more beatings or drinking. His promises held for about three weeks.

When the beatings started this time they were far more vicious and didn't just accompany the flashbacks. Anything could bring his rages on. He said that if we tried to leave him this time he would kill us all. Everytime he hit her I would run to get the knife, but I would remember how hard he had struck me last time and fear would seize me. I would just stand there waving the sharp blade threatening and screaming at the top of my lungs.

“Stop hurtin’ my Momma!”

But I was afraid to attack him. I felt like a coward and could hardly look at either of them in the morning. I couldn't look at my mom because I had failed her and not at Darryl because I hated him and wished him dead. Huey and Tank knew all about it. They had even been spending the night a couple of times when Darryl had flipped.

Once he kicked both of them out of the house in their pajamas in the dead of winter and their mother had to come pick them up at one o'clock in the morning. She was pissed but knew better than to say anything to Darryl. I never spent the night over at their house because I was afraid to leave Mom alone with Darryl. I was afraid I'd come home to find her tied upside down with her brains leaking out of her ears.

Huey understood. Huey and I used to sit around for hours planning ways to kill the mutherfucker. Huey seemed to take the beatings as hard as I did and was probably the only kid on the block besides myself who didn't idolize the princely black lion that was my father. Huey and Tank had both begun to look at my mother as if she was their mom too. I guess I looked at Charlotte the same way. We were like siblings and they reacted to me and my mother's pain as if it were their own.

“I'm glad I don't have a father.” Huey said to me one day, “No one should have to be forced to grow up with that. It's a shame that women have to marry men. Men only hurt them. That's all men are good for is destroying things and hurting people. Us too. That's all we're good for and when we get older it will only get worse.”

Huey was always saying deep shit like that. Shit that makes you think, makes you wonder, and, more often than not, makes you sad.

“It doesn't always have to be like that. You see good dads on TV. I think white kids have good fathers don't they? Rich kids maybe?”

“Nope. That's why it's on TV. Right next to Spiderman and Barney the talking dinosaur. Because that shit is just a fantasy.”

Huey was at my house the day Darryl snapped and tried to murder my mom. It wasn't another flashback, just a fit of pure meanness. He found some cyanide capsules and tried to force my Mom to take them.

“You gonna try and leave me bitch! I've given you everything, you *and* that bastard kid of yours!”

He punctuated every sentence with another blow to my mother's skull.

“Everything you wanted! Everything I had! I gave you everything and you wanna try and leave me? You ain't goin' nowhere. You hear me? You ain't leavin' here alive!”

“Please, baby, I ain't goin' nowhere! Nigga, I ain't playin'! Don't you hit me no

more!”

She fought him hard this time, biting and clawing at his back, punching and kicking when she could get an arm or a leg free, but just like always, he threw her to the floor and sat on top of her. His knees were in her chest. He had her jaw gripped in his huge tarantula-like hands and was trying to force the pills down her throat.

“Bitch, I’ll kill you! I’ll kill you, that little pussy-ass son of yours, and myself. I’ll kill us all before I let you get out of here.”

I ran and got the carving knife. Huey was right behind me. I pulled it out of the kitchen drawer and then ran into my parent’s bedroom. Then I froze. I stood there like a fool waving the blade and yelling at Darryl to stop, watching as he attempted to murder the only thing in this world, besides my grandma, that I had ever loved. Watching as he forced poison into her mouth. The only thing in this world that had ever loved me back, that had ever made me feel safe and happy.

I saw one of the pills slowly making its way into my mother’s mouth as he brutally pried her jaws apart and my vision narrowed until it was like I was watching the whole thing through a keyhole. Slowly the light began to fade and I felt my body go limp. I was losing consciousness. I felt small hands slip the blade from my hands just before my head hit the carpet. I wanted to see who the hands belonged to, but even as I fell my eyes would not leave my mother and my periphery vision was gone.

Those tiny hands entered my miniscule field of vision in slow motion. Tiny light brown hands raising a knife high into the air above a tiny light brown head with curly brown hair. The hands rose and fell and rose and fell. Each time they rose a wave of liquid red followed the blade in an arc that flew from the metal and splattered the walls. The hands rose and fell again and again until they were no longer golden brown. Until they were the blackest red I had ever seen, slick and shiny like crimson oil.

Just before my mind shut down completely I thought to myself, “Huey was right. All men are good for is destroying things and hurting people. Even us.”

Then I dreamt, of concentration camps and jungles set ablaze with napalm. Darryl was burning in my dream. He was burning alive in the jungle. I saw him die twice that night.

The cops thought I had killed Darryl, but there was no evidence linking me to the crime and we never told them about Huey being there that night. They knew about the beatings so, when they ran into a dead end in their investigation, they just figured Darryl had gotten what he deserved and closed the book.

I tried to confess to the murder, but so much evidence pointed away from me, including my mom’s own testimony that someone else had broken in and stabbed him to death, that no one believed me and those who did couldn’t prove it. The cops looked down at me like I was stupid and pitiful and when they spoke to me it was in patronizing voices that they probably thought were soothing.

“I’m sorry kid, but if you had killed your dad you’d have blood all over you. I know you probably wanted to kill him though. I know if I was you I would have wanted to.”

I cried. I wept so long and so loud that I started having an asthma attack. I didn’t even know I had asthma until then. As much as I wanted to accept the blame for ending Darryl’s life it was denied me. Deep down I resented Huey for taking that away from me.

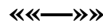
I was grateful to him for saving my mother's life and ending her misery, but I hated him for denying me the chance to kill the bastard myself. Yet, somehow, Darryl's murder still drew us all closer. Secrets have a way of doing that sometimes. After that, more than ever, we were like brothers. And each year brought us even closer together. I wish now that they had never met me. They would have been better off and maybe Tank would still be alive.

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Chapter 6

“...The chief problem in any community cursed with crime is not the punishment of criminals, but the preventing of the young from being trained to crime.”

—W.E.B. Du Bois, “The Souls of Black Folk”



1999. It was almost the end of summer and every kid I knew in that neighborhood was piled up on Huey’s porch, joking, bullshiting about bitches we’d never met, jumpshots we never really made, and fights that we never won, drinking Kool Aide, Colt 45, and passing around a bottle of MD 20/20 when Huey’s mom wasn’t looking.

It seemed like the entire neighborhood turned fourteen that month one birthday party after the other. In our minds we were men now and it seemed like we should have had better things to do than sit around getting drunk, but I was at a loss as to what. I looked from face to face noticing the shadows of mustaches creeping beneath noses that just a year ago seemed to have been still dripping with snot. I listened to the deep bass that now replaced the child-like tenor that had been there before and I kept wondering what kind of orgy must have gone down the year I was conceived that had led to so many women getting pregnant around the same couple of weeks.

Warlock was already blunted when he got there and the pungent musk of stale weed exuded from his pores in a great cloud that was giving us all a contact high. His homeboy Terrance was so fucked up he couldn’t even keep his eyes open. He sat in a corner on the floor grinning and nodding. Whatever he was on it was a hell of a lot stronger than weed.

“Get this junky muthafucka off my porch ’fore my Mom comes out here and sees that nigga!” Huey said, but nobody moved a muscle to comply and Huey went back to tinkering with the VCR. Everybody was so used to Huey complaining that they had learned to ignore him. Half of us were drunk already anyway and probably didn’t look a whole lot better than Terrance did.

Nikky held the bottle of MD under his T-shirt and constantly complained about its chill against his bare skin, but wouldn’t relinquish the bottle for anything. Everytime we passed it around he made sure it stopped at him before Huey’s mom came by. At fourteen years old he was an alcoholic in training.

Tank had somehow talked Fat Greg into springing for a pizza and they were both on the phone yelling at the pizza man about a free soda that was supposed to come with the pizza. The Twins, Jerome and Tyrone, who looked like two young, underfed, Muhammed Ali’s, were hogging the only two deck chairs and complaining about the heat and the long walk to the video store.

“Damn! It’s hotter than a muthafucka out here! I ain’t walking all the way back down to the Ave with ya’ll to take those videos back. That walk was long as fuck!”

“Stop cryin’ like a little bitch!” Little Drew spoke up and just as fast Jerome reached over and smacked him on the back of the neck.

Little Drew was the richest kid in the neighborhood mostly because he was the only kid we knew who still had both parents living together and two incomes coming in. He was an only child though and his parents practically paid us to hang out with him. When he was around us he liked to front like he was hard, but we all knew he was a mama’s boy. We always teased him that he should never commit a crime or else he’d wind up in prison with Kool-aide on his lips, washing drawls, braiding hair, and popping the zits on Bubba’s ass. We all knew that he would’ve rather gotten his asshole ripped open by a convict than take an honest ass-kicking. These days it was fools like him that you had to watch though. Nobody on earth was quicker to pull a trigger than a coward. He was supposed to be trying to help Huey hook up his mom’s VCR to Huey’s old black and white TV, but he kept butting into everyone’s conversation and getting abused for it.

“Damn, dog! You ain’t have to smack me in my goddamned neck!”

“Now who’s cryin’ like a little bitch?”

“I should take my damned VCR back for that shit.”

“You ain’t takin’ shit back. Now lift the TV so I can slip the VCR underneath it and stop being a little pussy before you get fucked,” Huey growled

“That’s right. You play pussy you get fucked!” Warlock co-signed, laughing his ass off.

Drew’s eyes misted over like he was about to cry as he looked around at us. He never knew when we were serious and when we were playin’ and he hated when we ganged up on him.

“Lift that shit, dog!” Huey yelled again and Drew obediently picked up the little TV.

We had planned to have a martial arts movie marathon and Drew’s mom had loaned us the VCR for the day as well as the money for the videos of course. Sometimes I think she’d have offered us some pussy to get Drew out from under her skirt for a few hours.

I was sitting on the porch railing praying the weather-beaten, termite-eaten thing wouldn’t collapse under my weight and send me tumbling down into that nest of weeds between the house and the street that we occasionally called a garden when in optimistic moods. It creaked and groaned every time I laughed and I thought I heard faint cracking and popping sounds, but everything just seemed to strike me as funny that day. There were Tasty Cake wrappers all over the porch and Huey was doing his best not to flip out about it though he had already mentioned the mess twice in five minutes. For such a sinister little thug he was almost prissy when it came to keeping things neat.

You could tell we were all from the same neighborhood at a glance. We all wore baggy shorts that hung down to our knees. Our boxer shorts stuck out the top as the shorts sagged well below our waistlines just barely covering our asses. We wore Nike, Adidas, or Reebok sneakers with matching tank-tops or t-shirts that were as oversized as our shorts. We all had baseball caps or sun visors spun backwards on our heads and of course we all wore dark sunglasses. Fat Greg was the only one wearing pants. That brother

wouldn't be caught dead in shorts; not with those overstuffed sausage-shaped legs of his.

Jerome and Tyron had started capping on each other's moms evidently oblivious to the fact that they both shared the same mother. I laughed so hard that I could feel the decrepit railing struggling to hold me.

"Your mom's so fat she had sex with two guys at the same time and they never even saw each other!"

"Your mom's so dirty that she eats dinner with no panties on to keep the flies off her food."

"Your mom's so black that if you close your eyes you can see her better!"

"Your mom's pussy spits tobacco!"

"Your mom's pussy has whooping cough!"

Those brothas were crazy! I laughed so hard I dropped a forty of O.E. I had been hiding under my shirt. See, we all drank Colt 45 around the way and to drink another brand was almost treason, but I liked the way it tasted. The bottle hit the floor and exploded, sending shards of glass shrapnel spiraling across the rotting porch and beer pouring off into the garden like a miniature waterfall. I nearly fell off the railing I was laughing so hard. I felt the wood splinter with a loud crack and I jumped from it as Huey cast an angry glance in my direction.

"Man, clean that fucking beer up before my Mom comes out here and whoops all our asses!"

I went into Huey's house to get a broom and dustpan and Mrs. Turner shook her head when I came back in and dumped the shattered forty into the trashcan.

"Ya'll better not be making a mess out there. And I better not smell no weed out there either. Ya'll shouldn't even be drinkin'!"

"Uh...we ain't drinkin'. I mean...not really. Just a little beer."

"Boy, get your lyin' ass out my kitchen 'fore I slap you right upside your head!"

I held in my laugh as I ran back out onto the porch.

"Your moms is a trip, dog."

"Why? Did she say something about us drinkin'?"

"Dog, she ain't even trippin' off that. She just said we better not be smokin' no weed out here."

"She probably smells this nigga." Huey grumbled staring at Warlock.

"Man, fuck you," Warlock hissed.

The pizza man showed up just as Huey and Drew finally got the VCR set up. Greg handed the man a twenty and retrieved the extra-large pizza. The delivery boy turned around and started to walk off and Greg's face contorted into a rictus of exaggerated outrage.

"Ay, dog! Da fuck is you goin' with my change?"

"That's my tip."

"Nigga, I ain't say shit about givin you no tip!"

"I know you ain't gonna have me come all the way up here and not give a brotha no tip?"

"Dog, don't be tryin'a play me like no sucker! What I look like some kind of fool to you?"

"Man, I ain't tryin'a play you. I'm just tryin' to get paid like everybody else."

Greg was the type of brother who thought everyone was trying to get over on him and laughing at him behind his back. His self-esteem was so low that he even thought the retarded kids at school looked down on him. I guess it had something do with being overweight. He was all attitude and appetite. Greg wasn't just large and solid like Tank. Tank could run a five minute mile even with all his bulk. Greg started breathing hard lifting his fat ass off the couch. He was all out of proportion. Short, with a huge stomach, plump stubby legs, arms that hung with cellulite like an old woman's, and big saggy man-breasts. He had cause to be defensive. Me, Tank, Warlock, and the twins, rose up and stood behind Greg, anticipating a fight.

"Fuck that tip shit, nigga! Ya'll muthafuckas wouldn't even give me that free soda ya'll advertised—talking about I had to order over twenty dollars worth of shit and this is only \$17.50. Now you tryin' to vic my change! You must be sick, fool!"

"Give that nigga his change before you get your ass fucked up." Warlock growled. He was twenty years old by then, anorexicly skinny, and five inches shy of six feet. The delivery boy on the other hand was probably closer to twenty-five, well over six feet and swollen up like a heavyweight boxer. But one look at Warlock's gold and you knew the man was a player. The pizza man looked Warlock up and down searching for a weapon then decided that he didn't want to take any chances with a porchful of niggas in a strange neighborhood. For all he knew we could have been a gang or something with a house full of artillery.

"Man, here's your damned two-fifty! You cheap-ass muthafucka! A brotha can't even make a damned livin'!"

"Not off my money you can't, muthafucka!"

"Ya'll shut tha fuck up! The damned movie's on!"

"Fuck you! Yella ass nigga!" Warlock joked, but he sat down to watch the film.

We started dividing up the pizza and in no time at all the box was nearly empty.

"Damn, niggas! I paid for the shit and all I get is one slice?"

Tank was standing there with the box in his hand, one slice still left inside, chomping down on another slice held in his huge meaty paw.

"Here, fool! Stop crying and take another slice!"

"Two whole slices? Thanks." Greg frowned.

"Ay, if you don't want it I'll eat the muthufucka."

"Fuck that shit!"

"Well all right then. Shut da fuck up and eat."

The credits rolled and all conversation died to a whisper. It was a Run Run Shaw classic, *The Five Deadly Venoms*. Huey began giving us a blow-by-blow rundown of the action as it unfolded.

"See this big muthafucka right here? His name is Toad and he does this iron shirt technique that makes him impervious to weapons. Spears and swords just bounce right off of him. That's a bad motherfucka right there."

"I bet a bullet would stop his ass." Little Drew offered trying to sound hard. Everyone just ignored him and kept watching the flick. We all knew that Drew's momma would kick his ass if she ever found him with a gun. Bitch ass nigga couldn't even leave the block without telling his mom first.

"See how in these Chinese movies when someone's fighting a group of people

they're always moving, the camera angles keep changing, the people he's fighting move in and out of camera range and everything is happening real fast so it don't look like they're just standing around waiting to get hit like in them fake-ass Van Damme flicks. Americans don't know shit about making Kung Fu movies. This here is the real shit!"

We watched two other films and then we decided to play football. It was about six o'clock in the evening and it had finally cooled down. Besides that, Drew's mom made him bring the VCR back in the house.

Darlene and Trina Livingston, two huge manly Jamaican girls who looked like female bodybuilders, had come out to play football with us. Darlene was the oldest. She was sixteen years old, had legs like Arnold Swartzenegger, and breasts like Pam Grier. She was the only one among us big enough to tackle Tank. Her younger sister Trina was just slightly smaller at 5'10" but no less intimidating. They were the best football players in the neighborhood. They could run, throw, catch, and hit like Mack trucks.

We chose up sides and I got Darlene, fat Greg, and both twins. Huey got Trina, Tank, Warlock, and Nikky. Terrance had finally come back to reality, but was still in no condition to play so he just sat on the porch and talked shit about everyone. We made him a referee.

We called the game 1-2-3 hold, but when it came down to it, it was straight up tackle. We played right in the middle of the street on concrete and asphalt. Slamming each other down hard on the steaming black top. Cars hardly ever came down our block and when they did we played right around them.

Huey's team had the edge in speed, but we had brute strength on our side. Seeing Darlene and Tank go at it was truly awesome. They weren't pulling any punches, at least Darlene wasn't, and it looked like they were going to kill each other, slamming into one another full force without helmets or pads. I was the only one who knew that Tank had a crush on her and that he was in heaven feeling her rock hard body slamming into him.

At first our team steamrolled Huey's. We slammed them into parked cars, denting not a few of them, slung them to the concrete like bundles of garbage, and wound up sending Warlock's little ass home with a sprained ankle and bloody knees.

Huey bobbed and weaved like Deon Sanders and nobody could catch him. In the end their speed proved too much for us. They beat us 42 to 35. I knew that we had only gotten that far because Tank was holding back when it came time to tackle Darlene. She on the other hand was trying to knock the stuffing out of him. It was funny to see his big, black, love-struck ass bouncing off the concrete over and over again still grinning at her like an idiot as she ran right over him. That was one of the best days of my life and the last day of my childhood. It was soon after that that our lives changed for good.

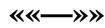
Chapter 7

“This American system of ours, call it Americanism, call it Capitalism, call it what you like, gives each and every one of us a great opportunity if we only seize it with both hands and make the most of it.”

—Al Capone

“...Here is something you can't understand. How I can just kill a man!”

—Cypress Hill, “How I Can Just Kill A Man”



There was a fierce heatwave scorching the life out of Philadelphia on the day I first met Scratch. The summer seemed like it would never end. The sun perched on our backs and rode us hard from six A.M. until damn near nine o'clock every night. The heat and humidity had coated the city like a sheet of hot oil. I think the temperature was ninety-eight degrees, but the humidity made it feel like a hundred and ten. The scorching temperatures were igniting fuses. The whole neighborhood was going ballistic. Folks were dying from knife and bullet wounds as much as from heat stroke. School was out. Violent crime was up. And everyone around my way was either trying to stay cool or trying to get paid. Both of which were nearly impossible in that boiling cauldron of madness and poverty that we called G-town.

Wasn't much of anything going down in the G that day. Water gun fights, crack pipes flickering in the dark alleys that provided the only shade on our treeless little street. Those who had someone to fuck were sweating in their lover's embrace propagating the next generation of the poor, hopeless, and pissed-da-fuck-off. Hip-hop music boomed from every radio, the bass thundering like the ghetto's heartbeat, a testosterone thunder-drum pounding out the rhythm and song of Black rage and rebellion.

“...Fuck da police coming straight from the underground... a young brother got it bad 'cause I'm brown...”

The basketball courts were filled with future Julius Ervings, Magic Johnsons, and Micheal Jordans, sweating half the fluids in their bodies out on the hard concrete courts as they leapt toward the hoops. Every fire hydrant was pouring out hundreds of gallons of water onto the scarred and filthy streets as equally scarred and filthy kids laughed and played in its cool spray. Me and my boys, Tank and Huey, were sitting around pitying ourselves and trying to think of someone to make suffer for what we wanted, didn't have,

and could see no way of ever possibly affording, when a deer walked right into the middle of our pack and bared its throat to the wolves.

This kid's name was Demetrious, "Meech" for his friends. He had just moved into the neighborhood from the Richard Allen Projects in North Philadelphia and he was always trying to prove himself by talking big about how tough his old neighborhood was, how we were all soft, how much money he had, and how many bitches he could pull; always bragging and showing off. As usual he started spitting some crazy tale to impress us, but this time he claimed to have evidence.

He said he was going to show us where he had hidden this gat he'd stolen from a dealer he used to mule for. He described in detail how he'd lifted this nickel plated .45 automatic and about two gees from the fool he worked for the day before him and his Mom had moved out of the housing projects and up into G-town. Immediately me and my boys began trying to figure out how to get the gun away from him and force him to get up off that cash.

"Show us that shit then. Unless you just bullshittin'?"

"I ain't bullshittin'! I'll show you."

We walked with him across McCallum Street and onto Pomona on our way to the big empty lot between Cherokee Street and G-town Avenue. My skin was vibrating with excitement as if it was going to dance right off my body. It was the way I imagined crack fiends felt all the time. Somehow I knew that everything was about to change for us. I wish I could say now that I'd felt the warning signs, that I'd had some type of premonition, some foreboding of the evil we were about to step into. But all I felt was the greed. All I was thinking about was the cash and the gun and what I would do with it when I got it. Now I know that it had to happen this way. Evil draws evil.

The lot was overgrown with weeds and filled with big rats that crawled out of the sewers to eat the garter snakes, salamanders, and trash. We walked carefully, looking out for the larger rats that were known to bite kids. Demetrious bent down and turned over a huge slab of asphalt that had probably been thrown there years before during some type of road repair project.

"Yo, man here it is!" He held up a big shiny silver automatic that looked strangely familiar, "See, nigga? I told you I wasn't just frontin'!" His features brightened into a proud smug expression as he brandished the impressive looking handgun. That's when I stepped back and really took stock of the kid I was about to victimize.

He was as tall as me though slightly more filled out. A year older than me though obviously not as bright. His clothes were brand new. A typical hoodrat whose parents spent all their money on clothes and jewelry while their homes fell further and further into disrepair. He wore a Sixers jacket and a pair of Air Jordans, ridiculously oversized FUBU jeans that hung halfway off his diminutive ass, and a long T-shirt that came down to his knees that read "North Philly". He wore a silver necklace with a huge crucifix attached to it. The biggest sinners were always the most religious.

His hair was cut short except for four or five inch long dreadlocks at the very front of his head. He wore what looked like a half-carat diamond stud in his left ear. I was sickened and insulted by Demetrious' flashy affluence amid our conspicuous poverty and I decided right then and there that I had to have that Sixers jacket, those sneakers, and that jewelry even if this kid had to die.

“Yo, lemme see that shit.” I said casually; reaching out for the big heavy gun as if the last thing on my mind was rollin’ him for those two gees. He wasn’t a total fool, though, and my reputation for doin’ crazy shit proceeded me.

“Naw, dog. You ain’t never handled no gat. You might kill somebody with your crazy ass.”

“I’ve fired ’em before. Let me see tha mutherfucka.” Huey said in his cold raspy monotone sounding like wind whispering through a morgue. Huey looked like Lenny Kravitz or Maxwell, like he should have been on stage singing a love ballad rather than in the hood with us, but he was perhaps the most vicious of all of us and damned sure the spookiest. He knew what I was up to and so he stepped forward and pinned Meech down with his hard adult eyes, hollow and dangerous as shotgun shells. There was nothing in that glassy amphibian stare that could be appealed to, still Meech tried anyway.

“Hey, Yo, I don’t know, man. I mean you cool and all but...”

Demetrious squirmed and stammered as if he could feel Huey’s lifeless eyes crawling over his flesh probing for weaknesses.

“But nuthin’ then. I ain’t even gonna shoot tha muthafucka. I just wanna hold it. You know, check it out and shit.”

Huey inched closer to him and his voice dropped to a smooth seductive whisper. Demetrious was hypnotized as Huey’s lithe cappuchino colored fingers slid across his and slowly lifted the gun from his hands . I pushed back the memory of those same agile hands slipping a weapon out of my hands just a year ago and turning it on my father.

“A-a-awight man. You can hold it. But just you, okay?” Demetrious said, adjusting the silver cross dangling over his chest and cutting a quick glance at me. People were always more scared of me than of Huey for some reason; until they got to know him better. I wore my craziness on the outside like a uniform. Huey’s madness festered and boiled inside of him just beyond his eyes. It took a while to notice it.

Huey gripped the huge pistol by the handle with two hands. He checked the clip then jacked a round into the chamber, clicked off the safety and handed it to me. Sunlight glinted off the metal and my eyes took up the gleam.

“Yo, man! Don’t chamber no rounds! That shit could go off! And I don’t want this crazy-ass-nigga touchin’ it! Gimme that shit!”

“Just chill, Bro. Don’t trip.” Huey said as he stepped around to block Meech from snatching the gun, which would’ve been a fatal mistake.

“Naw, fuck that! I don’t want this psycho muthafucka fuckin’ around with my gat! Gimme that shit!” He reached for it and I pushed him back. Tank stepped up next to Huey and his tremendous girth literally blocked the sun. He stared down at Demetrious who seemed to be near panic, and grinned like a Downs Syndrome child with a mouthful of feces.

Tank was fourteen years old now and he was already as big as a heavyweight boxer, about 6’ 3” and 230lbs.

“You ain’t gonna let this punk bitch talk to you like that and get away with it is you, Snap?”

Snap was my nickname, earned because of my anger management issues and impulse control problems.

“Grab that nigga, Tank.”

Tank scooped Meech up like a sack of groceries, wrapping one of his thick meaty arms around Demetrious' throat; not choking him, but preventing him from escaping. The other arm caught Meech's right arm in an underhook. Meech fought and kicked to get free of Tank's stranglehold, but there was no way he could free himself from the much larger boy. I stepped up and pressed the barrel of the gun against his right eye.

"I bet this muthafucka could blow the whole side of your head apart." My eyes started getting that wild look as I remembered the way that Rasta's head had flown to pieces and imagined this kid's brains splattering across the grass. My breath came quicker and quicker in short ragged bursts. My blood raced through my veins carrying healthy loads of adrenaline. I wanted to do him. For no particular reason I wanted to smoke that fool. Just to see what it would look like.

"Come on, dog. Quit playin'! Don't point that at me, dude! It could go off! Come on! Let me go! Quit playin'! Let go!"

"Nigga, do I look like I'm playin' with your bitch ass?!"

Growing up in the projects of North Philadelphia, Demetrious had seen enough violence to know that this certainly wasn't no joke. He started struggling harder and Tank was beginning to have a difficult time holding him.

"Bro, you better calm down right now or I'll drop you right here. Word to God. If you say one more fuckin' word I'll split your wig wide open." I had looked in the mirror often enough to know exactly what Meech saw on the other end of that gun; one big, black, crazy muthafucka who didn't give a fuck about nothing.

Demetrious tried to change his approach and began begging and whining.

"Come on, Snap. I thought we was boys, man?"

Even though Snap was my nickname, at that time I was still ambiguous about it. It was okay for my friends to call me Snap, but some nigga I hardly knew?

"Bitch, I ain't your fuckin' boy! These is my boys right here." I said, gesturing towards Tank and Huey. "I could give a fuck about your punk ass! Now what's up with that cheddar, fool?"

"Bro, I swear I ain't got no cash. I was just frontin' about that shit."

"Like you was frontin' about this gat? I'm about to fly your head in two seconds so you better think fast." I pressed the gun deeper into his eye and gritted my teeth, imagining the loud report of the huge weapon.

"It would be a damned shame if you was lyn'." My eyes had gone vacant and glassy with the bloodlust. I was trying to muster up the courage to eat this kid's brains the way I had seen that white gangster do when I first moved into this neighborhood. If a white boy could do it then I damned sure could too. Fuck if I was going to chew his balls off though. That was just takin' it too far.

"Meech!!!"

An alien voice rang out behind us and I almost turned and shot at it, but I knew that Demetrious would have taken that opportunity to run and if I had to shoot him I didn't want it to be in the back. That would have ruined his jacket and I still wanted it.

I turned my head and was surprised to see a white boy walking across the field with two hyper-muscular thugs on either side of him like massive black bookends. The white dude was wearing a FUBU shirt with pictures of Fat Albert and the gang on it. Two big platinum chains draped down over his emaciated chest one ending in a crucifix and

the other with a diamond encrusted medallion shaped like the continent of Africa. On him both symbols were a mockery. He wore big clunky Timberland work boots despite the heat and lack of snow and a black "North Philly" baseball cap spun backwards on his blonde head. A pair of jet black "Loce" style sunglasses with the Gucci label on the arm completely hid his eyes, but I had seen them before, first furious and then enraptured as he had consumed that Rasta's gray matter years ago. I hadn't thought about that shit in a long time. After a while I had managed to convince myself that it had all been in my head. But seeing that white boy walking toward me across the field brought it all back to me. There standing across from me was the devil himself.

He had a platinum three-finger ring with the name "Scratch" spelled out in a cluster of diamonds. His mouth sparkled with platinum capped teeth with rubies embedded in the canines that gleamed in the failing twilight. The white boy's sunglasses slipped down the bridge of his nose as he peered down at us and his cold blue eyes narrowed into slits. The whites of his eyes had sallowed from excessive marijuana use.

Back then I didn't really know any white people. None of the kids I hung out with knew any either. We went to school with them, but we never spoke to them and they never spoke to us either and never ever came into our neighborhood. They were like mysterious specters existing just on the periphery of our experience. Influencing our lives in frightening and dramatic ways that we could scarcely imagine, but never seeming to come into direct contact with us. The man who shut off your heat and your telephone when you couldn't afford to pay the bill that month was white. The man who tacked the eviction notice up on your door when the rent was late was white. The man who came to arrest your father and take him away to prison forever was white. In our minds, white people were right up there with God and the devil. They were spoken of in whispers and curses and appeared in gross proportions in every aspect of mass media from the pictures on our candy wrappers to the televisions, movies, magazines, and billboards we saw every day. They passed us in department stores and gave us strange looks that made us feel guilty and unclean, somehow less than a person.

There was no doubting who he was. Even if I hadn't seen him blast and then cannibalize that rasta on my doorstep a few years back, everyone had heard of Scratch by that time. Seeing a white boy living down in the ghetto slangin' cane and shooting up the 'hood made news. By the time Huey, Tank, and I had gotten tight, Scratch had tightened his grip on the whole neighborhood and bizarrely had become both enemy and idol. He had "Gangsta" emblazoned across his soul right next to the neon sign that flashed "Murderer" in searing crimson. Since the day I'd seen him off one of Jah Warrior's boys outside my window he'd grown into one of the biggest crack dealers in North Philadelphia. Still, I decided to front like I didn't know him just to play hard. I was hoping he wouldn't notice my legs shaking in my baggy jeans. I was scared shitless.

"Who the fuck is you?" I asked, still jamming the barrel of the gun into Meech's eyesocket.

Scratch's two bodyguard's, dressed similarly in FUBU running suits and big clunky Timberland boots were already drawing their guns. Every dealer who was clockin' major chips back then had bodyguards. His were megalomorphous giants both over six feet tall and close to 300lbs. They were teenagers as well, highschool athletes. The largest of them I recognized as a lineman on G-town High's football team.

“That little mutherfucker owes me some chedda...” Scratch slurred, still glaring hard over the top of his Gucci sunglasses. Then he turned those cold slivers of ice toward Meech, “...and some pain.”

Demetrious shuddered visibly.

“I don’t give a fuck! We got business with him ourselves and since we got to him first you gonna have to wait your turn whoever your Vanilla Ice lookin’ ass is supposed to be.” I looked him up and down sneering contemptuously.

“You ever here of Scratch, little bro?” He asked calmly pointing to the name on his ring. “Well that’s who the fuck I am, my nizzle! So if you know what time it is you’ll act like you know and turn this fool over to me. You know I’m sayin’?”

His slang was thicker than the most ignorant thugs I knew, but it was obviously exaggerated. The dialect of someone reared on gangsta rap.

As if subtlety could exist in such titanic forms, his two bodyguards crept closer inch by inch trying to quietly position themselves for an ambush, plotting to jump me for the gun and smoke us all. But I wasn’t about to go out like that. I had lived with death all my life. I could sense its every movement and very nearly read its thoughts. It swirled around Scratch transposed over his image like a double exposure. The taint of it had already marked his bodyguards. I wondered then if it had perhaps marked us as well.

I nodded to Huey and he slipped around to the side of the bodyguard nearest him ready to intercept should they try some dumb shit. With Huey and his brother at my side I was feeling damned brave even though the two linebackers were both even larger than Tank, and Huey was smaller than all of us. However, what Huey lacked in size he more than made up for in skill. He was lethal with that martial arts shit.

“Alright, if you Scratch then what tha fuck do a big time hustler want with some little pussy-ass nigga like this? And what the fuck is you doin’ up here in the G? I thought ya’ll kicked it down in North Town?”

“This little bitch vic’ed some of my stash and my money. That’s why I’m here.”

Scratch smiled wide so that the sun sparkled on his bejeweled orthodontic work at which point his two bodyguards lunged clumsily for me. I had been anticipating the attack and squeezed off a shot, catching one of them high on the thigh and missing his family jewels by mere inches. Huey took the other one’s kneecap off with a roundhouse kick. His shin impacted the huge teenager’s patella with a sickening “Crunch!” that bent his leg backwards against the grain and sent him tumbling earthward with an ear-piercing shriek. Huey scowled viciously and then kicked the knee again eliciting a fresh howl of agony then he drew his foot back as far as he could and aimed a kick at the boy’s jaw. The jaw made a hollow popping sound as it came unhinged and hung stupidly from the fractured tendons. The big boy’s eyes rolled up in his head. He was unconscious before his head finished its decent to the steaming dirt floor.

The bodyguard I’d shot was reeling on the floor cursing and groaning in pain and rage. The recoil from the huge gun had nearly torn it from my grasp. My heart was trip-hammering in my chest and my blood raced with exhilaration. I nearly swooned with the rush of adrenalin that hit me as I pulled the trigger. It was nearly as strong as the recoil from the gun and I stood there trembling; visibly shaken by it as the big black leg breaker prepared to aim a shot at my head.

“Muthafucka! You shot me! You little bastard muthafucker! I’m a kill your punk

ass!”

“Fool, you ain’t killin’ shit.”

He was too slow and Huey was on the case, silencing him with a kick to the bridge of the nose that shattered the delicate cartilage and smeared his nose across his face in a bloody spray before he could properly aim. The shot sailed about two feet over my head and ricocheted off a building somewhere off in the distance. Huey collected both the guns from the two fallen killers. Half the size of Scratch’s tremendous bodyguards, Huey’s psychotic ferocity and martial arts knowledge had made him twice their match. They hadn’t stood a chance.

“What was you gonna try and smoke all of us over this muthafucka?”

Scratch shrugged his shoulders as if to say: “You can’t blame a muthafucker for tryin’,” and kept staring from me to Demetrious to the two defeated leg-breakers and then to Huey who leveled his eyes, blistering with an inexplicable hatred, at him as if they were lasers that could burn him to a cinder. I looked down at the two guns in his hands and hoped that he wouldn’t shoot. Huey hated white people as if each and every member of the race had done him some grave and personal injustice. A white boy who had just tried to kill him was almost guaranteed a trip to the grave. But we both knew better than to off a guy like Scratch.

“Okay, so now what?” Scratch asked. He tucked his sunglasses back over his eyes to hide his expression and a bemused smirk creased his face.

“How you know I won’t smoke your cracker ass right now?”

“You won’t,” he said flatly.

I punched Demetrious in the gut with the loaded .45 letting a little air out of his lungs, then I pointed the pistol right at Scratch.

“You want him that bad?”

“Yeah. That nigga owes me.” Even though he tried to remain calm, I could tell he was shaken by the quick efficient handling of his bodyguards. He was staring at Huey like he had just stepped out of a spaceship. Huey stared back at the white thug like he was a particularly large and unpleasant pimple that he was considering squeezing the puss out of.

Scratch’s cunning, televangelist, con-man smile resurrected itself, stretching nearly around to the back of his head and displaying each one of his platinum capped teeth. He looked like a great white shark about to swallow a boatload of sun worshippers.

“Ya’ll ain’t no killas. How about I let you keep the guns if you give that muthafucka over to me and I promise you won’t catch no static for fuckin’ up my bodyguards either. Punk-ass niggas couldn’t handle a bunch of freshman then they deserved to get broke up.”

“Well, that’s damned generous and all, but we keepin’ these gats anyway so that ain’t no deal. But I tell you what, you let us keep the cash he took from you and we’ll get the drugs back plus I’ll blast this nigga for you.”

“Naw! Naw! Ya’ll can’t just kill me! I’m just a kid! I ain’t did shit! I ain’t got shit, Scratch, and if I did, you know I’d give it up. I wouldn’t hold out on you, bro! I ain’t got no drugs.”

“You ain’t got shit, huh? Then what was all that shit you was talkin’ ’fore he showed up? And stop squirmin’ before you mess around and rip that jacket ’cause once

you're a ghost I own that shit."

Demetrious still believed he could just talk his way out of this and walk away with his life. I smacked him hard with the heavy pistol opening a huge gash on his head that began dripping bright red blood. He slumped in Tank's grasp, his eyes wild with fear. The bloodlust was vibrating in my nerves, churning in my stomach like physical hunger. I wanted to shoot the gun again. But this time...I wanted to kill.

"Get that fuckin' jacket off 'fore you fuck it up! That shit's mine now. And get them sneaks off too!"

Scratch seemed to relax then. He slid the sunglasses down his nose and looked over them at us shaking his head, finding our vicious greed both amusing and pitiful like lions in a circus. It was the way white people had looked at me all my life and it made me furious. Tank jerked the jacket off Demetrious' shoulders and I punched the gun into his eye socket again.

"Don't think about tryin'a break out cause I'll cap your ass right tha fuck here! That's my word, dog. Now try me!"

Demetrious stared meekly into my eyes and remained still as Tank removed the jacket.

"But I ain't do shit!"

"Shut tha fuck up!"

I turned back to Scratch.

"We got a deal or what?"

"Word, little G. We got a deal. Just don't bitch when it's time to fulfill your end."

"Fuck that. I don't never bitch from no two gees."

"Hah! You niggers ain't never even seen two gees."

I bristled at the way he pronounced "niggers." I wanted to cap his ass just for that.

"So, how you gonna get him to tell where the shit's at? You bad little thugs got the heart for torture?"

"I know where the fuck it's at," I said confidently, but inwardly uncertain.

"He had this gat just sittin' there under that rock where somebody might have found it. I bet the rest of that shit's right in his bedroom or..."

Quickly, I turned and smacked Meech with the gun again as hard as I could causing Tank to wince and step back as blood from Demetrious' forehead splattered his face allowing him to slump to the ground. His eyes rolled back in his head and his forehead continued spraying blood from the fresh wound.

There was something I loved about head wounds. The blood was brighter, redder, and it pumped out more easily. It reminded me of Darryl's war stories. When I got older I would be known for shooting fools in the head even though everyone knew the body was an easier target and that someday I would miss and wind up getting my ass killed. It was dumb and dangerous, but it became my thing.

A lot of wannabe gangstas carried guns, but few actually used them; still fewer of those who used them actually intended to kill. Often they would shoot a fool in the gut where they might be paralyzed if it hit their spine, but not killed. But if you flew some fool's head it left no doubt in anyone's mind that you meant the shot to be fatal. I bent down over Meech's semi-conscious form and began pulling cash out of his pockets.

"Yeah! I knew that shit! This dumb muthafucka. I knew if he wouldn't hide a gun

in his crib he wasn't gonna hide no two gees there."

I unfastened his pants and pulled them down to his knees. There was more money and a big sack of white powder in his drawls.

"Little dick muthafucka! I should have known you wouldn't leave this shit lyin' around for your momma to find."

"That little ass sack ain't all of it though."

I stopped and thought a moment. Had this kid started hittin' the pipe and smoked that shit all up or had he sold it? If he'd sold it then where was the other money? Then Tank spoke up.

"Yo, right here man."

He reached into the Sixers jacket and pulled two more fat sacks from the lining. The three sacks combined must have weighed five or six pounds.

"Well there you go, white boy. I guess that means this cash is ours then."

"Nuh-uh, nigger. You ain't finished." Scratch said pointing to Meech.

"You know what, white boy. I don't like no fuckin' peckerwood callin' me nigga." I pointed the gun at his head again and that crazy look was back in my eyes.

"You stallin' or what?" Scratch said with a smirk.

"Step back, Tank." Tank dutifully stepped away from Demetrious who was just starting to revive.

The bodyguard I'd shot in the thigh started talking shit again and I swerved the gun away from Scratch and pointed it at him until I realized he wasn't armed then I pointed it back at Scratch.

"He ain't gonna do it, Scratch. He's just a little bitch! And I'ma smoke him and his little faggot friends when..."

I swiveled like a turrent and aimed the gun at Demetrious who was now wide awake and staring at me in horror. I pulled the trigger.

BLAM!

The report from the .45 interrupted the tirade from the larger of Scratch's bodyguards who now stood gripping his wounded thigh; squeezing it as if to force out the bullet. Blood was caked all over his face from his shattered nose. Demetrious's chest had blossomed in an explosion of red like some great ghastly rose blooming. The kind that only bloomed in hell. His hands thrust out in front of him as if to ward off the bullet, fluttered limply to the ground with a jagged hole between the middle and index fingers of his left hand, and a long whistling exhalation issued from his lungs as they rid themselves of the now pointless oxygen. His pants were still down around his knees and his briefs turned crimson as his heart pumped his body dry trying to get blood past the ruptured arteries and pulverized organs and up to his brain succeeding only in spurting it out of his ruined chest in a steady fount.

I stuffed the money in my pockets in big handfuls and tossed the sacks of coke to Scratch. Snatching up the red Sixers jacket I started to retreat then paused to untie Meech's sneakers and slip them off his feet. If I had seen how much blood had soaked into them I would have left them. Tank wrenched the half-carat diamond out of his ear and held it up to the sun grinning autistically as it refracted the light, then he shoved it deep in his pockets and turned to his brother who showed neither scorn nor approval. I removed the platinum crucifix from around his neck and tossed it to Huey. Huey held the

necklace in his hands staring at the tortured effigy of Christ as if it were the most horrible thing he'd ever seen. It dripped with Meech's blood adding a gruesome realism to the artistic rendering. It was as if we were witnessing the crucifixion in miniature. Huey stared at it a moment more and then stuffed it in his pocket.

Huey and Tank fell in behind me with their reappropriated weapons pointed right at Scratch whose mischievous smile had once again abandoned his face. His two bodyguards were behind him, licking their wounds in mute shock.

"That was evil. That was just plain vicious!" The smaller of the two bodyguards said, holding his jaw in place with one hand. Scratch's smile slowly slithered back onto his face like some alien presence taking over him, but it never reached his eyes. They remained cold slivers of blue ice glaring frostily over the top his Gucci sunglasses.

"Yeah, I likes that. You boys did just fine. I'ma have to have ya'll come work for me when ya'll get older. Yeah, I'ma see ya'll again. Soon."

His words hung ominously in the air like a curse carved into the mouth of a tomb. We slipped out of the lot. We ran up the street and ducked into an alley on Cherokee and Duval streets behind the old laundromat, which was now a crackhouse and shooting gallery. Moments later we heard two gunshots come from the lot. We stopped and looked at each other, but didn't say a word. Then Tank and I both noticed that Huey was sobbing. This too brought back the recent memory of Darryl's murder. He had cried then too.

"Fuck is you cryin' for, nigga? You actin' like some kinda bitch!" Tank said as his big dumb smirk twisted into a malicious scowl of disgust.

Huey punched him in the side of his head. Hard. But of course Tank was just barely fazed.

"Fool, if you can take another brotha's life and not be affected by that shit then you ain't nothin' but a fuckin' monster. You're a devil just like that white muthafucka back there! Sometimes we gotta do what we gotta do to come up, but still...don't nobody deserve to die."

He stormed off leaving Tank and I standing alone in the piss-smelling alley, shocked and confused.

Huey was one strange brotha sometimes—too deep and too spooky to really relate to. I thought about what he'd said all night and then dismissed it. It made no sense to me. It only depressed and confused me to think about the senselessness of some brothas dying just so other brothas could enjoy a fleeting moment of success. Niggas lived. Niggas died. And if I didn't pull the trigger it was just a matter of time before someone else did or they dropped the hammer on someone else themselves. Why cry over what you couldn't change?

Still, Huey had made me question myself and think about the little boy whose life I'd stolen, his parents grief, and how his life may have turned out had I not abbreviated it. I fought down the tears not wanting to admit that Huey might've been right.

Later that night we heard on the news that three bodies were found in the lot; two seventeen year-old boys, one with a broken jaw and dislocated knee, the other with a bullet hole through his left thigh and a broken nose. They both had three clean nine millimeter bullet holes through the back of their heads. One had three entrance wounds but only two exit wounds. One in the roof of his mouth and the other in his lower jaw. Three front teeth and the tip of his tongue had been sheared off. The other one had

acquired a third eye and been reduced to one nostril. The last bullet had gone through the very top of his head and down his throat.

“There was also a fourteen year-old boy with multiple blunt instrument trauma to the skull and a gunshot wound in his chest...” The newswoman continued.

Scratch had retired his two leg-breakers with three clean shots each for getting their asses kicked by ninth graders. Unknowingly, we had taken three lives.

What the newscaster didn't say, but I knew, was that all three of them had their brains sucked out of the holes in their skulls. They didn't need to report it on TV for the news to make its way around the neighborhood. Things like that had a way of getting out no matter how hard the police tried to suppress it.

The newscaster wrote the incident off as *“...yet another in a long series of senseless drug related killings in the Germantown section of Philadelphia...”* She had no idea just how senseless these particular killings were. I started sleeping with the .45 under my pillow and locked every window and door before I closed my eyes to sleep, no matter how hot it was. I still can't sleep in a house with a window open.

We entered the 8th grade with brand new wardrobes in all the latest fashions and at least two pairs of sneakers each. Our new gear established us in school as bonafide playas.

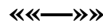
Our new status was a drastic change from what we had previously known and we weren't at all willing to go back to the dirty little street thugs that everyone made fun of. Right then and there we decided that we had to stay suited up properly no matter what we had to do or to whom we had to do it. When our mother's asked us where we had gotten all the clothes we told them that we had a friend who worked at a clothing store and they had stolen them for us. Our parents scolded us half-heartedly for stealing, but were secretly relieved not to have to buy us back-to-school clothes. In the ghetto the gift horse was so rare that when it came you didn't just look it in the mouth you cut it open and gutted it out.

We never talked about how we had really gotten the new gear, not even to each other, and we tried to pretend that we really had stolen them rather than paid for them with money soaked in blood. Black blood. We had all become killers that year and our lives were irrevocably altered.

Chapter 8

“I’m from the place where the church is the flakiest... And nigguz been prayin’ to God so long that they’re atheist.”

—Jay-Z, “Marcy”



In the ghetto, as in the world, clothes make the man. The policeman’s uniform, the prostitute’s latex mini-skirt, the pimp’s gator shoes, the gangsta’s low slung jeans sagging off his ass. They all give clues to the nature of the individual beneath. Books are judged by their covers here and we strolled through the halls of our little Jr. High School covered in FUBU, Adidas, Nike, and Gucci. Fights were no longer started by insults from others about our outdated clothing. We were stylin’ now. The girls treated us differently now too. They actually asked us over to their houses and out to the movies rather than just laughing in our faces when we tried to ask them. The clothes made all the difference.

We acted differently too. In a society where the standard of excellence is wealth, poverty can tax your self-esteem and your entire sense of self-worth. Likewise, a dose of affluence can boost your confidence tremendously. My grades, which had been slowly slipping down into the toilet, made a dramatic recovery. I wasn’t afraid to raise my hand in class and ask questions when I didn’t understand something. I didn’t mind calling attention to myself anymore. Not when I was wearing two hundred dollars worth of designer labels on my back.

Mrs. Greenblade, who credited herself for my transformation from class clown to honor student, began to take a special interest in me. She convinced me to work on the school newspaper writing editorials on school politics and an occasional book or movie review. I loved writing and so I started reading the paper everyday and took elaborate pains to make all the articles I wrote sound professional, just like the ones in the *Philadelphia Enquirer*. It excited me to finally be appreciated for something other than just being a bad-ass crazy mutherfucker. Even though I knew that hardly anyone but the teachers really even read the damned thing unless, of course, someone had been robbed, or beaten, or shot. Kids were morbid like that.

Mrs. Greenblade even tried to convince me to give up my lunch period to attend her journalism class, but I had to pass on that. Since I was already staying an hour after school to work on the paper I figured she could teach me all I needed to know about journalism then. Lunchtime was when me and my boys jacked fools for their cash. I couldn’t give that up.

At the teacher’s suggestion I began to keep notes of my daily thoughts and experiences. A lot of what I’m sayin’ here today comes out of those notes. It’s hard to

recall how much of it really happened and how much of it is just bullshit. Being a writer it's always difficult to refrain from embellishment and the whole story is just so difficult to believe. Still, it's as honest a telling as I can manage.

When I reached the eighth grade, Mrs. Greenblade recommended me for the mentally gifted program after I passed the level fourteen English test; the equivalent of college freshman English. Unfortunately, my math scores were about two grades below the level they should have been for my age and they rejected me with a recommendation that I get some tutoring to improve my math skills.

"I'm sorry you didn't get into the program. I can't believe you weren't accepted. You're one of the brightest students I've ever taught. If you want I could arrange for someone to tutor you on your fractions and long division and we could try it again in a couple of months?"

"Naw, don't sweat it. I ain't want to kick it with them computer geeks no way."

"How is it that you can write such beautiful poetry and essays and speak so eloquently in the classroom and then speak like such a savage?"

"You're supposed to speak all proper in class. I mean, I thought we was just being casual right now. You know, just talkin' like friends."

"I want you to talk to me like a friend, Malik. I just don't understand why you can't speak intelligently all the time. Why do you have to talk like the rest of those ignorant heathens when you've got more upstairs?"

"Because I'm one of those ignorant heathens. And when I leave here that's what I go home to. And they ain't the type that respects proper diction. Talking above them won't win me any friends."

"And talking beneath yourself will?"

"You know, when I'm at home my mom and my grandmom are constantly correcting my speech. They want to make sure that when I get older and go out on job interviews, or if I wind up at some Ivy League college or something, I won't give the white man any excuse to think I'm any less intelligent than he is. She wants me to be able to enunciate and pontificate with the best of 'em. She even had me reading the dictionary. She heard some professor say that if you committed yourself to learning one new word a day you'd be one of the smartest people on earth in just a few years. I'm still in the Bs. Do you know what a Bête Noir is? Its literal translation is Black Beast and it means an adversary or something loathsome. I've got tons of useless words like that floating around in my head. When the hell do you think I'm ever going to use Bête Noir in conversation? But I learn all this shit to make my mom happy. Last year my grandmom took all my comic books away. You know what she has me reading now?"

"What?"

"*Roots*, *African Genesis*, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, *Song of Solomon*, *Native Son*. She finishes reading a book and hands it right to me as if there was no difference between us and I read them from cover to cover. I don't understand a lot of it, but she helps me. I keep a dictionary nearby too. It sometimes takes me months to finish one but I read them because that's what my mom wants. I read those books before I read the junk you guys give us to read in here. I read them because I don't want my Grandma to lose faith in me. She thinks I can be somebody some day."

"That sounds great. It sounds like your grandmother is a very wise woman."

“Yeah, but even though my mom and my grandmom know how smart I am my mom always tells me not to ever talk above my own people. You know why, Mrs. Greenblade? Do you know why she tells me that?”

“No. I honestly don’t”

“Because I don’t live in the world of books and poetry. I live in the damned ghetto and what good is language except to communicate? What good are fancy words that no one understands? I talk to you this way because this is what you understand. But I talk slang in the street because that’s the language they understand out there. My mom taught me that the dialects of the streets are just as complex and beautiful as the Queen’s English and that I should learn that language just as well as book language so that I can communicate with everyone. You see, Black folks have to live in two worlds, the world of Business and Academia, the White world, and the world of the streets. You feel me?”

“Yeah, Malik. I feel you. Your mother is very wise and very right. Maybe I should take some of her advice myself huh?”

“Nah. If you ever said, *Fo’ shizzle my nizzle*, I think I’d die laughing. Either that or punch you right in the mouth.”

I turned to leave. Lunch had begun ten minutes ago and I was anxious to bully my way into the lunch line, eat, and hook up with Tank and Huey out in the yard.

“Malik?”

“Yes, Mrs. Greenblade?”

“Would it be alright if I passed you along some of the books I read?”

“Yeah, that would be cool.”

Mrs. Greenblade turned me on to some stuff that would change the way I looked at the world forever. Existentialism gave voice to many of the intuitions I’d had growing up. Intuitions that told me that maybe all this suffering was for nothing.

I read Camus’ *The Stranger*, *The Plague*, and *The Myth of Sisyphus*. I read a play by Sartre called *Nausea*. I devoured Herman Hesse’s *Narcissus and Goldmund* and *Siddhartha*. I was entranced by Dostoyevski’s *Dream of a Ridiculous Man* and the novel that had the most impact upon me, *The Brothers Karamozov*. I had never read anything like these novels. They were full of spite and cynicism, ranting tirades of existential angst. I know now that I wasn’t ready for it. I was overwhelmed and nearly devastated by the revelations these books brought me to. Desperate questions, blasphemies, whose answers only led to more questions. A snowball effect that caused a ricochet in my brain. Questions bouncing back and forth at increasing velocity and force until it felt like my mind would shatter. Why? Why? Why? Why? They turned my whole world upside down.

I read these books feverishly and each one pained me as much as it thrilled me. It was in a chapter of *The Brothers Karamozov* titled “Rebellion” that I received my most disturbing, and horrifying, enlightening. One of the novel’s main characters, Ivan Karamozov, issued the most powerful indictment of Christianity I had ever heard.

He described in graphic detail the suffering of a little girl who was abused by her parents and forced to sleep in an outhouse and a little boy who was torn apart by hunting dogs and he asked what kind of divine plan could rest on the suffering of little children? Ivan Karamozov wanted no part of such a plan. No eternal harmony was worth the suffering of innocents and any god who would allow such a thing was unjust. It was too high a price. “*I prefer to live with my unavenged suffering and my unappeased anger...*”

he shouted, rather than accept what he deemed to be the “overpriced ticket” to paradise; rather than participate in the cruel plans of an unjust God.

I kept the book in my back pocket and read it over and over again. Not the entire book, just that one chapter, until the pages fell out of it.

I had always believed in the goodness of God even though everything in my experience spoke against it. Every horrible thing I’d witnessed in the hood flew in the face of faith and the idea of a wise and benevolent deity, but still I believed because that’s what I had been taught to do. I hadn’t even been aware that disbelief was an option. But now I knew. There were disbelievers and no lightning bolts had come down from the sky to smite them. I checked. A seed of doubt had been sown and even God’s very existence was now in question. Mrs. Greenblade may not have realized it, but by making me think and question my beliefs, exposing me to those self-tortured European authors and philosophers who seemed to believe in nothing, she might have corrupted me more than anything that had ever happened to me in the streets. Ironically, it was the words of a preacher at my Mom’s church that issued the most tragic wound to my faith.

I had started going to church with my mom and Grandmom after the incident in the lot. I can’t say I was making any heroic efforts to obey the commandments, not if it meant turning my back on my boys, but I was trying to make amends for the things I’d done and would do in the future through prayer.

I was wearing my best suit; soft gray, double-breasted, pinstriped, with a black tie and handkerchief. Over my mother’s objections I wore a small platinum crucifix in my left ear. We didn’t have a car at the time so we walked the seven and a half blocks to the massive two hundred year-old Baptist church. We lumbered along at a snail’s pace due to the premature arthritis in Grandma’s knees.

Grandma wore a huge purple hat with a big white bow that matched her purple and white dress. Mom was dressed in a form fitting blue dress that came all the way up to her neck, with an open back that went almost down to her ass. She had a black shawl wrapped around her to make her party dress look more respectable, but that didn’t save her from getting dirty looks from Grandma. Her head was adorned with a blue pillbox hat that matched her dress and she wore black heels and carried a matching black purse. As always, she was the prettiest one in the congregation and stood out both because of her impressive height and beauty and her dress which just barely escaped being scandalous. Jealous whispers and envious eyes trailed us to our seats.

We had sat through three songs, two sermons, and one selection from Hebrews:11 when the choir began to hum softly a tune I recognized: “Jesus Is Calling My Name.” Reverend Thoroughgood told us all to turn to Chapter 42 of The Book of Job. This was the passage in which God rewards Job with “...Fourteen thousand sheep, and six thousand camels, and a thousand yoke of oxen, and a thousand she-asses...” and also, “seven sons and three daughters.” He then blesses Job with a long life of a hundred and forty years so he could see, “...his sons, and his son’s sons, even four generations...” All this after Job had refused to curse God even after God had smote him with sore boils from head to toe, killed all of his children with a hurricane, and destroyed all his servants, cattle, and wealth in order to win a bet with Satan. The bet was that Job would still praise his name no matter what cruel and torturous shit he did to him.

“And even as Job lay humbled, reduced to poverty and illness he still refused to

curse God and God rewarded him with twice what he had before.” The reverend intoned in a deep resonant voice followed by a host of “Amen” and “Praise Jesus” from the congregation.

“So, when God tests you, when your electricity or your heat gets turned off cause you can’t afford to pay the bills, that’s when you should praise God the most!”

“Amen!”

“Praise the, Lord!”

“When you lose your job and you can’t afford to put food on the table. When your loved ones are murdered in the streets or fall prey to drugs or alcohol or crime, when your health is failing, that’s when you need to give thanks!”

“Yes, Lord!”

“Praise his name!”

“When you are victimized and abused by your fellow man. Give him praise!”

“Praise, Jesus!”

“Thank you, Lord!”

It was madness, all of it, complete and absolute insanity. I wanted to jump up out of my seat and scream.

“What the fuck are you people talking about? Give thanks to the bastard that caused all this pain? To some fuckin’ god that doesn’t lift a finger to stop our hardship, tragedy, and disaster in the hopes that he will make it all better eventually? And so what if he does cure your ailments after you’ve suffered for motherfuckin’ weeks, months, or goddamned years? Couldn’t he have prevented it from ever fuckin’ happening? And when has anyone in the ghetto ever been repaid for their suffering no matter how strong their faith?”

It was lunacy, but I kept my thoughts to myself.

“Just remember in the midst of your suffering that God is merely testing your faith. Once he has seen the truth of your faith and piety, he will set you free. And just as Job was rewarded for his conviction, so shall you receive twice what you had before brothers and sisters. Remember it is all a part of his plan.”

Bullshit! I thought. *Fuck his plan!*

The whole congregation was on its feet praising God and hanging off the reverend’s every word. Even Mom and Grandmom were waving their hands in the air and shouting for Jesus, but I just sat there boiling in silent rage as Ivan Karamozov’s words echoed in my head.

“It is not worth it. It is too high a price.”

I was enraged that God would put man through such torture merely to test the depths of our love. If God is all knowing then why would he need to test anyone? He would already know who would pass and who would fail. It seemed cruel, capricious, self-centered, egotistical. This God that everyone loved so much seemed to possess some of the most fucked-up human qualities. That day I began to question every notion I’d ever had about God. I began to wonder if God really loved us after all.

I couldn’t understand why we gave thanks to the overseer that kept us enslaved. Why we thanked him for the strength to endure the whip. I thought about all the times I’d heard my Grandma say how blessed we were to have food on the table and wondered if we were then damned on the many nights when we went hungry. I wondered if we were

blessed on the nights we laid awake listening to the big sewer rats rumbling through the cracked and water-stained walls and ceilings, afraid to let our hands or feet dangle off the side of the bed at night for fear that one of them might gnaw off a finger or toe while we slept. Afraid the entire ceiling might come crashing down on top of us from where the floor joists had warped and rotted from the leaky toilet above that was constantly overflowing. I wondered if we were blessed when we couldn't find a single piece of food in the cupboard that wasn't infested with roaches. I wondered if I was blessed all those times I was teased for wearing hand-me-down clothes that barely fit.

I stood up and walked out of the church.

"Malik! Malik! Where the hell are you going? What are you doing?"

"I'm going home. This is all bullshit."

"What did you say?" my Grandmother cried appalled.

"That preacher doesn't make any damn sense at all. I'm out of here."

I left with everyone shouting at my back.

I picked up the Bible that day and began to read it. I tried to forget about all the things people had always told me about God and read it with a completely open mind. I wanted to see what the Bible was really saying and not what others said it was saying. Every word I read shook my faith further. Worst of all was the Bible's condoning of the institution of slavery.

"...And the Lord said unto her, Two nations are in thy womb, and two manner of people shall be separated from thy bowels; and the one shall be stronger than the other people; and the elder shall serve the younger. Genesis 25:23"

I thought of all those white power groups that used the bible to justify their prejudice and was shocked to find that again and again the Bible does just that. It blatantly stated that Christians should make slaves of the heathen races. It was absurd to me that black people, who had suffered these fates, should worship the God that engineered it all. I could not help but to lose some respect for my own race. It was like they were all blind.

Despite all the begging and praying black folks did and all the millions of dollars they dumped into collection plates, God seemed to avoid the ghetto like the plague. Children got killed every day, and every day the pious were drained of wealth yet none of that ever seemed to shake their faith one iota and not once did I see any of them rewarded with a single oxen let alone a thousand. No sheep. No camel. Nothing. Yet still they believed. It was like God had better things to do than to fuck around in the ghetto with a bunch of poor helpless niggas. He was too busy smiling and tap dancing for the white folks who lived in the nice clean neighborhoods with white picket fences and forty-thousand dollar SUVs.

In my mind, God took on the persona of every other criminal and con-man in the ghetto getting fat off the desperate hope and naivety of the under-class. Then again, the way fools were killing each other around the way he might just have been scared to come down there. His messengers and so-called "Servants on Earth" certainly seemed to be. They couldn't wait to climb back into their big shiny Lincolns and Cadillacs and floor it back to the suburbs once all the offerings were counted and all the sheep pacified. Of course, it might not have been so hostile down in the hood if God had taken more of an interest.

I spent many restless nights after the reverend's sermon reading what was left of my dog-eared copy of *The Brothers Karamozov*, trying to relate it to my life. I read the Book of Job and tried to accept it. I wanted my faith back but I just couldn't accept it. I kept hearing Job's impossible declaration: "...Though he slayed me yet will I trust him." How? Why? Why would God persecute someone who loved him so dearly just to prove to Satan how much Job loved him? How could he merely replace all the wealth and children he'd destroyed with twice what he had before and think it excused the senseless suffering he needlessly allowed Job to endure? It seemed so cruel and insensitive to me to kill someone's children and then say, "Oh, don't trip. I'll make sure you have twice as many kids to replace those." I wondered if that's what God thought when he saw little Black kids gunned down in the street? But when Black kids were murdered, when our wealth and our health was blown away by the wind, despite our refusal to curse his name, we didn't get so much as forty acres and a mule.

I couldn't tell you how many times I cried myself to sleep wondering what we had done to make God hate us so?

I envisioned God as one of those white business men looking down on the ghetto from one of those towering office buildings downtown, aloof and immune, wondering how he can suck more profit from our misery. In my mind God was white and he hated us just like all white folks did.

My Mom started dating this Muslim brother that tried to tell me that God was Black. I laughed in his face at first but he persisted. He said that we were all God's chosen people descended from the tribe of Shabazz. He was trying to make me feel better, I know. I'm sure my Mom had told him about my little episode at the church and how I had refused to ever go back. But all he did was piss me off even more. If God was Black then why the hell wasn't he doing anything to help Black people?

I thought about all the bourgeois Blacks I knew: the doctors, lawyers, businessmen, and politicians, who talked a good game to gain Black support and achieve their positions and then promptly turned their backs on us once they achieved their desired status. They would put as much distance as they could between themselves and the people who helped to make them what they were. I thought of all the big-time players and pimps, the hustlers and gangstas who leech off the black community and exploited their own brothers and sisters worse than any white man ever had. If God was Black then he was just another bourgeois nigga who got large and forgot where he came from. Somehow the idea of a sell-out, house-nigga god, was worse than the idea of a racist white one.

"But it ain't God doing all that. It's that trickster, that blue-eyed devil that Dr. Yaccub created to torment the original man, the Asiatic black man. He's the one making our lives hell, that white devil"

There was that reference to the white man as the devil again. It seems all these Muslim cats believed that shit. I just couldn't buy it though. Just like all the other racial conspiracy theories, it gave white people too much credit. I just couldn't see how they could be that slick and crafty to keep Black people fucked up for so long. All the dirt Scratch was doing in the hood would have been more than enough to convince most mutherfuckers that his ass was Satan. I could definitely believe that he was evil. I just still couldn't accept that all of them were. Still, even if that shit was true, God created Dr. Yaccub, who created the white man, so it was all God's fault anyway. Besides, he

damned sure wasn't doing shit to correct the situation.

I stopped believing in God. I was convinced that the lives of Black folks, and mine in particular, was just some cruel-ass joke. I started drinking again and getting high. I had never stopped fighting but even that got worse. More and more often I skipped school. Mrs. Greenblade kept trying to bring me back around but I had lost all interest in school or anything else. It was all pointless anyway.

"What's going on with you, Malik? You were doing so well. Is everything all right at home? Do you need someone to talk to? You are just too bright and you've got too much potential to just throw it all away like this. I might have to fail you if you keep going like this," the overweight, middle-aged schoolteacher pleaded with me. She looked like she was on the verge of tears.

"Do what you gotta do. Ain't no thang to me."

"Malik, please. Just tell me what's going on?"

"Remember that last book you gave me by Jean Paul Sartre? *Being and Nothingness*, I think it was. You gave it to me after I told you my thoughts about God and Black folks."

"Yes?" she seemed relieved that I was opening up. I guess she thought I was giving her a chance to talk me out of whatever I had gotten into my head.

"I gotta confess. I really didn't understand much of it. But, it seemed to be saying that if there is no God and life is without meaning than there are no rules, no restrictions. That man is as free as he allows himself to be. I think that's what he meant by the idea of an absurd freedom. If life is absurd then we are free to create meaning, define our own destinies. Anything is possible."

"Yes, that's exactly what he meant. I wanted you to see that your race or your economic situation need not hinder you in becoming anything you wanted to be."

"Yeah, I got that. But if life is without meaning then there may be no restrictions on our actions, but that also means that there ain't no motivation either. If everything is meaningless then there's nothing holding us back, but there's nothing to drive us either and what type of freedom is that shit? It's like puttin' a kid in a candy store, but first removing his taste buds. The fact that life is meaningless makes me want to do nothing, but you can't live doing nothing and everything you do creates conflict, especially in the 'hood. Conflict creates pain, and that pain demands the question 'What the hell am I suffering for?' To which Sartre answers, 'Nothing.' That's truly fucked up, man. As much shit as we go through it should mean something. It should be worth more."

"Malik, you're wrong. There's plenty in this world that's worth doing. That's just one man's perspective."

"But he's right. Maybe there's something worthwhile in your world, but not in mine and despite all that bullshit about freedom my world is all I'll ever know."

That was pretty much my last day of school. I'm mostly self-educated. I continued to read about philosophy and only succeeded in depressing myself further. No one had anything that was worth believing in. All the philosophers were just cowards and liars, afraid to see the truth or afraid to speak it for fear of being unpopular. No one knew the truth and no one even seemed to be looking for it anymore. I gave up on everything but my friends.

Huey, Tank, and I began going downtown into Center City, to South Street,

almost every night to jack white boys for their cash or even their clothes if they looked expensive enough. It was during this time that I got arrested for the first time.

We were down on South Street on a Saturday night feeling roguish and hostile. It was just three nights before Halloween and about ten minutes before midnight. There were already many people out in costume. Early Halloween parties disgorged onto the street and blended in with the gaggle of freaks and weirdos that packed the dozen blocks that led from the harbor to the Broad Street subway. South Street was Philadelphia's version of Greenwich Village or Haight Ashbury Street. Every nationality, sexual persuasion, and alternative lifestyle the city offered paraded up and down the street in outlandish regalia. From thugs to transvestites, punk rockers to pimps, there was not a single group lacking representation in some form or another. Even the suburbanites from New Jersey and the main line jammed the sidewalks snapping pictures at the urban cultural oddities.

The closer it got to Halloween the weirder South Street became. Between Seventh Street and Front Street cops occupied every corner looking nervous and tense, clearly aware that they were outnumbered and probably outgunned as well. Riots on South Street were almost a Philadelphia tradition. They were so common they hardly even made the news anymore unless someone got killed or something. From Eighth Street to Broad Street however, a short mile that took you within a few blocks of the Martin Luther King projects, there was not a police officer in sight. There the streets were dark with shattered street lights and abandoned tenements. Each alleyway you passed was a potential death trap. And if you were dumb enough to leave South Street anywhere along its length, even as far down as Front Street, you were just asking for pain.

The three of us stood outside the pharmacy at Fifth and South watching the hoes, hookers, and naïve young suburban bitches stroll by. The suburban girls were even easier to pick up than the hoodrat hoes. You could almost hear the rap lyrics playing in their heads when they looked at us, wide-eyed and expectant. There was a six-foot red-headed girl grinning at me from inside the store and I couldn't stop staring at her. She was fucking gorgeous! I knew Huey would have some shit to say about me fucking with some gray bitch, but all I was thinking about was getting my dick wet. Fuck all the politics. It's all pink on the inside.

My eyes traveled up and down her body and I shook with want. Her breasts were tremendous. I would have put her bra-size somewhere in the middle of the alphabet. Her ass was thick and full, but with as much muscle as fat and her hips were wide as well. Her waist however was small and narrow with just the slightest hint of a tummy.

“Yo, Tank.”

“Wa'sup, dog?”

“See that red-headed snowflake in the store? I bet you I can pull that before the end of the night.”

“Aw, bro, she's fine. You think you could pull that?”

“Shit, all a Black man needs to pull a white bitch is a big dick and an attitude.”

“Yeah, and a little self hate.” Huey interrupted, scowling in disgust.

“Dog, don't even start trippin'. Pussy is Pussy. Some just got flatter asses and straighter hair than others, but when you up in it, it all feels the same.”

“How the fuck would you know? You ain't never been up in nothin' except

Yolanda's fat ass!"

"Fuck you, man. I gets plenty pussy. Just watch me pull this snowflake bitch."

Huey was right though. I'd never been with a White girl before and White people still scared me a little. That's why I liked kickin' their asses so much. It helped me get over my fear of windin' up in their freezer like one of Jeffrey Dahmer's butt buddies. But this bitch was too fine to let a little thing like getting hacked up and stored away as leftovers scare me off.

I strolled into the pharmacy and cut off any reply Huey may have wanted to make. The snowflake looked up as I walked in and smiled. She was definitely about to get fucked.

"You look like you need a thug in your life." I said, lowering my already husky voice to a deep rumble as I stepped behind her; purposely leaning close enough to her ear so that my hot breath could be felt on her neck.

I knew that what white girls liked most about black men was our overt sexuality and straightforwardness. At least, that's what I thought it was they liked about us. It might have just been that datin' niggas was in fashion.

"Oh yeah? And just what makes you think that?"

"Cause here it is midnight on a Saturday night and instead of being made love to by someone who would kill or die for the treasures between your thighs, you here buying Snapple and shit."

She laughed.

"Yeah, and what could a thug do for me that any man couldn't?"

She was laying it on the line and since I had been so bold with her so far and it had been working I decided to play it like a pimp the whole way.

"Well, a player like myself would treat you like you need to be treated. Like a queen or a goddess," and now for the trump card, "...and a whore."

She stared at me disbelieving for a second like she was trying to decide if I was for real or not; waiting for me to laugh and say I was only kidding, but I stared back into her eyes like I was perfectly serious and then to further emphasize my point, I slowly looked her over from head to toe like I wanted to tear her apart right there in the store. Finally, she smiled and seemed to make up her mind.

"What's your name, baby?"

"Christina."

"Where do you live?"

"Me and my mom live right across the street above the bookstore."

Then, as an after-thought she added:

"My mom won't be home all weekend."

She was about seventeen years-old and I knew she thought I was the same age. At fourteen years-old I was already six-feet-two inches tall and had a voice like Barry White. I didn't have much experience with girls though. The closest thing to real sex I'd ever had at that point was with Yolanda. And every time I looked at a White person I still saw Scratch's face. Even though I didn't really believe all that Muslim shit about white people being devils they still sort of creeped me out a little. Still, I wanted to fuck this white bitch bad.

"Give me your address. I'm coming over tonight."

“Damn, you’re fast! How do I know you ain’t some kind of psycho or something?”

“Well, you don’t. But I give my word that you’ll enjoy anything I do to you.”

“You’re a sick mutherfucker. I like you.”

I couldn’t believe it. How dumb could a woman be? A sister would have cussed me out by now and probably pulled a box cutter on me and tried to slash my face. White girls lived in a whole different world. Violence is so foreign to them that they couldn’t even imagine being beaten up or raped by some niggas they met on South Street. Life to them was all fun and games and as much as I wanted to prove her wrong and turn her world upside down, hurting women wasn’t my thing and I wanted some pussy far more than I wanted to prove a point. I had gotten blowjobs and handjobs from Yolanda, but other than that I was still a virgin and was anxious to change that.

“My friends are waitin’ for me. We got some business to take care of. Let me get that number ’fore I leave and we’ll hook up.”

She wrote her number down along with her address and slipped it to me. When I reached for it she held on.

“Are you really gonna call? Don’t take my number if you ain’t gonna call.”

I reached over and grabbed her by the back of the head pulling her closer until our lips met. I slipped my tongue between her lips and found hers coaxing it out of her mouth where I sucked it like an erect nipple then nibbled her bottom lip. Every hair on my body was standing on end. Despite my macho show of confidence this bitch scared the hell out of me. I was almost afraid she was going to try to suck my brains out of my mouth. I was breathing hard and my heart was thundering in my chest when I slipped her number out of her hand and left.

“Hold up! What’s your name?”

I stuck my head back through the door.

“My name’s Malik. My friends call me Snap.”

“Call me. Okay, Snap?”

I didn’t like the way it sounded in her plain, flat, unaccented voice.

“Uh, just call me Malik.”

I slipped out the door and rejoined Tank and Huey on the sidewalk.

“I don’t believe you kissed that devil,” Huey hissed.

“Fool, I’m gettin’ fucked tonight. I don’t give a fuck what your ass got to say about that shit.” I started strolling off toward Sixth Street.

“Fuck is you goin’, Snap? We goin’ to get some pizza.”

“With what money?”

All the money we’d gotten from that incident in the lot had long been spent.

“Fuck buyin’ some pizza. We just gonna jack some white boys for their shit.”

Huey’s greatest joy in life was victimizing the dominant racial group and I knew that it was no coincidence that his craving for pizza happened to coincide with a young white couple leaving LA Pizza and heading down Fifth Street with an extra-large.

“Come on. Let’s swoop on these mutherfuckers,” Tank whispered excitedly before charging across the street.

The couple had just passed Record Exchange on Fifth and I knew there was an alley in the middle of the next block where we could jump them. My heart wasn’t really

into it though. I was too busy thinking about getting my first piece of ass.

The guy was as tall as me but heavier. At six-two I was still only a hundred and sixty pounds whereas the white boy was nearly two-hundred pounds. Tank was much heavier than the white boy though, which made me feel more confident. And Huey, who was still just over five feet, was completely dwarfed by the guy. The girl he was with was a tiny frail looking little thing. No ass, no breasts, five feet tall and barely a hundred pounds. She was blonde with spiked hair, tattoos and earrings up and down both ears, wearing saggy old fashioned clothes that didn't match and obviously came from a thrift store. On her feet she wore combat boots. I never understood why some girls seemed to go out of their way to make themselves look ridiculous.

By the time they reached the corner we were behind them and they knew it, the way a herd of antelope senses when they are being ringed in by hyenas. They started whispering to each other and peeking back at us. We didn't care if they knew what was going down. There was nothing they could do to stop it.

Tank left our side and started walking in the street just in case they tried to run. The alley was now just a few yards away. As the couple drew closer to the dark gaping maw between the two buildings they grew more and more tense. They knew that this was where it would happen.

From their left, Tank began to close in on them circling around in front of them and Huey took over his former position in the street. I stayed behind them and just as we reached the alley I grabbed the white boy in a bear hug and started dragging him into an alley.

“Hey! Let me go. Da fuck are you doin’ man? Help! Help!”

“Shut the fuck up.” Tank growled and then leveled him with a right hook. The pizza fell to the floor and was trampled as we scuffled.

The white boy was dazed and thankfully silent as we dragged his limp body into the alley. I thought the girl had run off because I hadn't heard her scream, but then, when I turned to look for her, I caught a face full of pepper-spray.

“Aaaaah! My eyes! The bitch maced me!”

I heard shuffling and cursing and what sounded like blows being thrown. The girl never screamed once as Huey and Tank beat the shit out of her and her boyfriend.

I still couldn't see as we ran down the street. Huey and Tank were holding my arms and guiding me along as we ran. I could hear doors opening in the houses as we passed. Whenever I tried to open my eyes pain washed over me. My own tears burned my skin as they dripped down my cheeks. My lungs were clogged with the stuff and I couldn't breathe. I felt like I was about to pass out. There was no way I could keep running. I coughed and sneezed and finally I stopped running.

“Come on, man. We got to go!” Tank yelled.

“I can't breathe! I can't breathe!” My mounting panic was making things worse. It felt like I was trying to inhale flames. My nostrils, throat, and even my lungs burned.

“Shit! We can't leave you here.”

“Damn straight you can't!”

“Shit. Shit. Shit. Tank! Can you carry him?”

“For about a block. Maybe two.”

“Well, fuck it. Carry him as far as you can.”

Tank slung me over his shoulder and we ran again. I thought I was going to throw up. After another minute or so my eyesight came back blurry and unfocused and still burning like I was looking into a blast furnace. What I saw wasn't good.

Three cop cars were speeding up the street toward us. Tank stopped and looked at Huey questioningly. Huey snatched our guns out of our wastebands and ran toward an alley across the street. Huey came back out of the alley just as Tank and I were being thrown across the hood of a police cruiser and cracked across the hamstrings and back of the knees with Billy clubs. If he had just kept walking he probably could have gotten away. Huey didn't look at all like a thug.

"You with these guys?"

"Yeah."

"Then your ass is going to jail too."

"You got any weapons on you?"

"No."

"Do you know what you're being arrested for?"

"Yes."

"Do you have any drugs on you?"

"No."

"How old are you?"

"Fourteen?"

"How old?"

"Fourteen?"

"You're a bit big for fourteen ain't you? You play basketball?"

"Don't all niggas?"

"Well, then you should have kept your black ass on the court instead of fucking around in the street robbing people. Now come on niggers and get your asses in the car! You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law. You have the right to an attorney..."

I spent the night in jail. My mom refused to come and get me. I spent eight months in Youth Study Center, Philadelphia's juvenile detention ward, before the trial. I was sentenced to another six months in Youth Study Center plus time served. After that the three of us were sent to Daniel Boone, probably the worst reform school in Philadelphia. Some of Scratch's boys were there at the same time we were. We joined up with his little gang just to make things easier. Reform schools are as bad or worse than penitentiaries. Kids were beaten, killed, and raped everyday by other kids and guards alike. Every morning I woke up to the smell of burning flesh. Setting fire to someone's bed was Boone's favorite way of eliminating an enemy. There were many kids walking around with severe burn scars to match the scars from shanks and shivs. Joining up with Scratch was the safest way to ensure that we would live through the night. Once we were back on the street our relationship with Scratch continued profitably.

"I heard you three little thugs was holdin' it down for me over at Boone. You in now. You want to stay in then come with me. I got plenty of work if you want it. Ya'll down?"

He smiled and his gold-plated grille gleamed like the fiery gates of hell. He wanted me to come work for the devil. I thought about all the money we'd made for

smokin' Demetrious' bitch ass and how nice it was to have all those cool clothes and shit.
Fuck it.

“Yeah, we down.”

A chill raced up my spine like a ghost had just crossed my path. I ignored it.

“What do we got to do?”

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Chapter 9

“There are many humorous things in the world, among them the white man’s notion that he is less savage than the other savages.”

—Mark Twain, “The White Man’s Notion”

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Scratch had been around so long that he was as much a part of the Black community as the soul food restaurants, rib joints, swap-meets, and storefront churches. He was as familiar a fixture as the Black Muslims selling bean-pies and Final Call newspapers on Cheltenham Ave and the junkies, crackheads, and winos chasing the next high up and down Germantown Ave. Like all of us, he was brought here by hard-luck and misfortune and had found a way to overcome it. And, like many of us, he had overcome it at the expense of the rest of the community. He was as much of a curse to black people as poverty, drugs, and AIDS.

I was still in diapers when he and his dad moved to Philly. His father, Stephen Hechtman, was a rich to rags case. Word is that he was a financial advisor on Wall Street when his wife caught him fucking around with this Black call-girl named Nikky who looked like a young Pam Grier, long legs, afro, big tits, coffee complexion and all. Seems he had a thing for the sistas.

Now, I don’t know the whole story, just rumors and shit and what Scratch told me himself whenever he was drunk and in a confessional mood. I’m not sure which version is more reliable. Scratch always had a talent for bullshit. But this is how I think it all happened, how Scratch became Scratch.

His mom caught his dad in their house, in their bed, with his face buried in this black bitch’s ass. She forgave him and they started going to counseling but then she caught his ass again. He’d been calling out sick from work to spend the day smoking crack and fucking that whore in her ass in a loft he’d rented for her in the village. The little trick had fallen in love. He was burning through their savings like it was a fucking holiday, buying his little whore all the drugs, clothes, and jewelry she could want. His wife divorced him while there was still something left for her to get half of. He lost his job soon after that and then he moved to Philly with his whore and his young son. He was now hopelessly addicted to rock cocaine.

He moved them into an apartment in Society Hill and him and his Nubian princess would spend all day and all night partying like rock stars, smoking rocks and fucking like fiends. That only lasted a couple of months before he’d smoked up the last of his savings and they all wound up in the projects. That’s where Stephen Jr. died and Scratch was

born,

For Stephen Jr. being the only White kid in the projects meant frequent ass-kickings and long hours of loneliness. He was deathly afraid of the teeming swarms of hostile dark-skinned kids that he suddenly found himself surrounded by. For them, he represented the establishment that had long victimized them. He was their chance to get back at the White man and they took that chance at every opportunity, sending young Stephen home with missing teeth, bloody noses, and fat lips, almost every day. Stephen would sit in his room crying while Stephen Sr. and his Black whore got high in the next room. He would remember the Manhattan apartment he'd grown up in, the exclusive private school, and his mother, whom he hadn't seen since the divorce. She hadn't wanted him and had given him away in exchange for the apartment. She had never really been much of a mother. He'd been raised mostly by boarding schools and daycare centers. Still, she'd been nicer to him than Nikky. To her, he was nothing but a nuisance and a drain on money she could have used to buy more crack.

Stephen thought of himself as an angel who had fallen from grace into a hell where savage Black devils waited to rend his flesh to ribbons and abscond with his soul. Each day was a misery and every sight, sound, and smell, was a profanity that mauled his senses and defiled his innocence.

His room was his only oasis. He had put a lock on the door and filled the room with books and comics. He kept a Walkman cassette player hidden under his bed so he could listen to music while he read horror novels. The books, along with most of the tapes, he'd stolen from Woolworths down on Germantown Avenue. No one really paid much attention to the book section. It wasn't normally a major target of thieves. He would read Stephen King novels, and books by Harlan Ellison, Graham Masterson and then Clive Barker and Jack Ketchum, reading long into the night as dope fiends and crackheads, friends of Nikky and his dad, partied on the other side of the door.

They brought home an old Black and White TV one day that they'd stolen from somewhere and had been unable to sell. It only worked intermittently, but it was better than nothing. Stephen brought it into his room and it, along with the horror novels, and Heavy Metal tapes, became his escape from the hell of the ghetto.

During the night, he clutched his dad's old .22 rifle to his chest; afraid that one of the dope fiends would break into his room and try to touch him. In the mornings, he crept through the piles of beer cans and liquor bottles, empty fast-food containers and junk-food wrappers, tip-toeing between the listless unconscious forms of his dad's new friends. He would risk the inevitable beating and steal whatever money was left over from their late night binge then catch the subway to McDonalds at Broad Street and Columbia Ave before making his way to school. They were barely managing to survive off of welfare and so his dad had begun selling small quantities of cocaine to support his habit and keep them all from starving to death and being kicked out on the street. Even though the rent in their little project apartment was only \$180 a month, it still had to be paid. Nikky still turned an occasional trick to help out as well.

Stephen was miserable and had stopped speaking to either his dad or Nikky. He just locked himself in his room and watched TV and read and dreamed of making enough money somehow to get back to New York, back his real mother whom he was sure must miss him terribly. In reality, the former Mrs. Liza Hechtman, who was now the current

Mrs. Liza Newborn, had never really been cut out for motherhood and being rid of the moody young boy with the long curly blonde hair and piercing blue eyes that she had given birth to, had freed her to pursue her life with her new husband. He too, an artist who was ten years her junior and unemployed, was unsuited and uninterested in parenthood. Once a month she would send a child support check that Nikky and his dad promptly smoked up.

At school, little Stephen was the teacher's pet. Smart, always eager to answer questions and help other kids, he couldn't understand why the other children resented him so much. Although he was the only White kid in his neighborhood, at school there were a few other White kids who seemed to fit in just fine. But for him, school would be a hard test for many years until he started slangin' caine.

Stephen was not a small boy by any means, but he had never been in a fight before attending school in North Philly and he had no idea how to defend himself. He was beaten up frequently but he never backed down, never gave up his lunch money, never let anyone steal his clothes or sneakers. Instead, he would take the ass-whipping. Each blow he received, to him, justified his hatred of Blacks and secretly, he took pleasure in it.

"You talk like a White boy."

It was lunch time and Stephen was sitting in the cafeteria trying to choke down a peanut butter sandwich when a short, raggedy-looking, black kid with a chipped front tooth, and a patch of shiny crinkled skin on his forehead from where he had suffered a third degree burn, came walking up behind him. The kid had a short Jheri curl that had dried out and turned frizzy. He looked like a pre-adolescent junkie.

"I am White."

"Yeah, but you sound like Richard Pryor doing an impersonation of a White boy. I didn't even know people really talked like that. You sound like a little pussy talkin' like that!"

"Man, just leave me alone."

"Sound just like a little pussy! What else you got in that lunch bag, little pussy?"

"Boy, you are not getting my lunch."

"Well, then you'd better give me some money so I can buy a lunch or else you gonna get your ass kicked!"

The idea of this short skinny little kid intimidating the much larger boy would have been laughable if it weren't for the fact that Steven was white and to most kids in the projects, white boys were considered easy targets.

"Go ahead and kick my ass then!"

Steven stood up and when the boy saw that that Steven was taller than him he started to back off, but pride would not allow it, and once he started punching Steven he found him a willing victim who didn't even try to fight back. Pretty soon, there was a crowd around the two boys. No one jumped in to break it up. For them, this was a rare and welcome sport. A break from the day's monotony. Steven fell to the floor and curled into the fetal position. The crowd of spectators seemed to have been waiting for that moment, and moved in to do the North Philly stomp all over his cringing body as soon as he hit the floor. When a teacher's aide finally intervened, Steven had suffered little more than a bloody nose and a few bruises, having done a successful job at covering himself from the blows, but his ego was grievously wounded. He'd had enough.

“What happened to you, son?”

“I just got my ass kicked! Like you fuckin care!”

“Don’t you dare talk to me like that! I’m your father!”

“When?! When are you ever my father?! When was the last time you were there for me?!”

“Stevie!” His mouth opened but nothing else would come out. He collapsed onto the ragged sofa with a look of defeat.

Stevie went into his bedroom and turned on the T.V. He pulled out the rifle, loaded it, and pointed it out the window. He pretended he was a KKK member in the deep south and he was hunting niggers who had raped innocent little white girls. He took aim at the group of black kids under the street lamp, but only pretended to fire. He imagined explosions of blood; muscle and bone avulsed, penetrated, and pulverized as the bullets tore through vital organs. He felt energized. He had almost forgotten the indignity he’d suffered at the hands of the battle scarred young black boy, but then when he remembered him and imagined turning the rifle on him and seeing the terror in his eyes, a new and delicious thrill electrified his nervous system. With a gun in his hand, he realized he would never be a victim again.

The next day, Steven stayed home from school. At 3 o’clock he left his house with the .22 rifle under his arm and started to walk to school. At 3:15 p.m., as the kids made their way home from school, Steven walked up, found a spot across the street, got down on one knee, and lined up the sites. A tall gawky girl in pig tails was the first to see him.

“Hey! That kid’s got a gun!” she screamed.

Steven fired and the little boy, Harold Green, age ten, the youngest of eight children, a C+ student, bed wetter, comic book collector, junk food junkie, bully, folded in half, and flew backwards several feet. The high powered projectiles disemboweled the poor kid. He clutched his stomach and tiny pink, blue, and purple loops of intestines unraveled and spilled out between his fingers. Steven Jr. had fired three times, and all three shots had caught little Harold in the gut, eviscerating him. Harold lingered for four days after the five hours of surgery to repair his lacerated entrails. On the fifth day he died of shock brought on by infection. Little Stevie spent less than a day in jail for the crime.

One of his fathers high powered Wall Street lawyer friends made the trip down to Philly, and ripped the asshole out of the young inexperienced prosecutor who was assigned to the case. He paid Steven’s bail, and took him back to the projects. The district attorney’s office decided not to prosecute due to lack of evidence, despite the possession of nearly a dozen signed statements of witnesses who claimed they could positively identify the little white boy as the killer. Charges were dropped and little Stevie Hetchman Jr. went right back to his miserable little life. But things had changed. Mr Hechtman’s Wall Street buddy was appalled to see how low his friend had sunk and offered to lend him a few dollars to get back on his feet. That few dollars was about twenty thousand, and the senior Steven Hechtman, still the financial genius, used that money to launch his own little drug business, and in the projects, business was booming.

Hetchman set up his drug operation out of his own apartment on the eighth floor of Cambridge Plaza in the Richard Allen projects. He paid off the housing authority police to not only look the other way but to guard his stash from thieves and rival dealers.

In the beginning, he used his own son as a mule to deliver the caps (small vials of

cocaine) to his dealers and to bring the money back to the apartment. Those ambitious dealers who wanted to buy real weight and go into business for themselves were allowed up to the apartment accompanied by one or more housing cops. They dealt through Nikky. No one ever saw Mr. Hechtman. He stayed in the background, organizing and planning. Negotiating with thugs was not his forte.

Every weekend, the old couple down the hall took the long drive down the coast to Miami where their tires were filled with several kilograms of cocaine. Then they drove their navy blue Buick station wagon with luggage strapped to the roof and tacky tourist trap souvenirs littering the back window, back up the coast at exactly five miles above the speed limit. Not slow enough or fast enough to attract attention, looking for all the world like an old retired couple enjoying a long deserved vacation. For their troubles they received five hundred dollars a week and free rent. For his efforts, Steven Hechtman was able to cut out the middle man and buy directly from the Columbians allowing him to make a larger profit than his competitors and still deliver a purer product. He bought his product right off the boat from Columbia. Pretty soon he had dealers on almost every block in North Philadelphia.

The demand for his product grew so large and his orders so huge that the Columbians began travelling to Philly to deal with him directly. This all made Stephen nervous as hell but it helped minimize the risk of transporting the product across state lines.

Two years after their enterprise began, crack cocaine was introduced to our neighborhood and quickly replaced the more expensive white powder. Business quadrupled. Little Stevie Jr. became the head of the dozen or so ten, eleven, and twelve-year-old kids who raced back and forth to the apartment, picking up the rocks when they were finished cooking, and racing them down to the dealers. Their customers often lined up in paranoid, scratching, jittering lines awaiting the arrival of their pharmaceutical paradise. After dropping off the product, the runners would then hightail it back to the apartment to drop off the cash. The dealers were required to turn over all their cash to the runners who would sign for it and issue a sort of coded receipt. Nikky would drive up later in her new, money green Lincoln Towncar to give them their percentage.

Nikky was in charge of the soldiers, the Housing Authority cops and the thugs they had hand picked to act as security and disciplinarians to his legion of dealers. If any of the young slangers were bold enough to take their percentage out before they gave the money to the runners, then punishment was administered swiftly and brutally. Drugs had leached away all of Nikky's humanity and compassion leaving a vicious, paranoid, sociopath who often miscounted the take and punished innocent dealers.

Little Stevie loved to go along on these trips. Almost every week someone was dumb enough to try to cheat the system and had to be dealt with. Either that or Nikky was just so high that she thought they were cheating. The result was the same. Stevie would wait in the car as one of the soldiers would jump out and break some young kids wrists or hands, or crack a bat across his knees and ribs. When Nikky was in one of her really vicious moods, she'd order one of her soldiers to retire a dealer by taking him into an alley and putting a bullet in his head and then spraying him with the Uzi sub-machine gun, unloading an entire clip into his face and torso and leaving him completely unrecognizable.

Once, Stevie asked if he could be the one to swing the bat but Nikky had refused even though her enforcers seemed amused by the idea. He didn't bother to ask if he could use the uzi. He knew his day would come.

Stevie took good care of the runners he lorded over. Each and every one of them had brand new BMX bikes, backpacks, and beepers, and he cut them a lot of slack, even when he knew they had stolen a little cash or product as long as they didn't get too greedy. He would simply threaten to expose them if they did it again and the idea of Nikky and her leg-breakers coming for them usually straightened them out. Then he'd alter a few receipts and make the necessary excuses to save their asses, further indebting them to him and giving him the power of life or death over them. If they were dumb enough to have gotten strung out then he would let them resign discreetly. Conversely, any runner who disrespected him would find their receipts altered and themselves accused of stealing which often meant a death sentence.

Stevie knew that it wasn't easy being a runner. They were the hardest working and lowest paid link in the drug chain, except perhaps the drug-addled housewives and retirees that cut the product, and they got blamed for everything. Any time a dealer got caught stealing he would invariably try to blame the lost cash or product on his runner. Stevie was often the only voice they had standing up for them, the only thing between them and Nikky.

The runners took huge risks carrying so much drugs and money through the maze of junkies, crackheads, rival dealers, and crooked nigger-hating cops. Stevie had been robbed at gun point on three separate occasions before his father finally relented and bought him gun. Afterward, Stevie considered equipping all of his runners with guns but decided against it. He had begun taking it into his own hands to retire the more incorrigible thieves and he didn't think it was wise to even up the odds. Killing the traitors who betrayed his trust and made him look bad in the eyes of the other runners by continuing to steal, had become his secret joy. He never told his father about any of his disciplinary actions. He was afraid that the old man wouldn't approve. Nikky suspected it, he could tell by the way she looked at him, giving him that knowing wink and satisfied grim whenever a new runner popped up to replace one of the old ones who had suddenly come up missing. As far as they were concerned, the runners were under control so they never questioned his methods. As long as the money kept flowing in, everyone was happy.

Stevie still suffered like mad from loneliness. See, he didn't really belong here. I mean, he did and he didn't. He had still thought of himself as an angel trying to survive in hell right up until he ate that kid's brains. Then he began to think of himself as another devil, the worst of them though, a fuckin' arch demon, but to everyone else, he was still just a White boy.

He looked to his small crew for friendship. The color of his skin, the flat colorless dialect he spoke in, the plain preppie-looking clothes he wore, the way he walked, swaggering like a gunslinger, all branded him as an outsider. Even the way he thought, his disinterest in girls or sports, fighting or dancing or graffiti, his inability to tell a good dirty joke, the type of music he listened to. He liked his father's old Doors and Beatles albums instead of Run DMC, Public Enemy or Slick Rick. He didn't even like Prince or Micheal Jackson. Dispite his ridiculous generosity these differences created a wall

between him and the other runners. As long as he was paying the way, everyone would show up but when he just wanted to hang out and play video games he often found himself alone. He grew increasingly resentful as parties were planned without him ever receiving an invite or jokes were told that he wasn't in on. He was mired in the same filth and sin as them but still he was not one of them. He was alone in the very crowd he had brought together. Often, he thought about that long ago kid who had picked on him for sounding like "Richard Pryor doing and impersonation of a White boy" and tried to alter his voice, his mannerisms and his inflections to imitate their slang. This too was unsuccessful. He was not very good at it and it sounded as if he was making fun of them. Soon, he stopped giving a fuck. He didn't care if he was loved as long as they feared him, and they did. They all did.

Killing a runner who had claimed to have been robbed of over six thousand dollars was how Stevie first discovered who he was.

"Ay fool! You! Come here!"

"Yo Stevie. W-what's up?"

The kid was three inches shorter than Stevie and two years younger. He had three gold teeth in his mouth that hadn't been there the week before and a thick gold rope around his neck. Stevie looked down at the kid's feet, he was wearing a brand new pair of Jordans. Rage turned Stevie's complexion crimson. He could feel something dark and terrible building within him. It was not an unwelcome sensation.

"Where'd you get that rope?"

"My mom bought it for me."

"What?"

"My-my mom bought it for me."

"Is you tryin' a play me? You think I'm a fuckin' joke?"

"Naw, naw I swear. She did!"

Stevie pulled out the revolver his father had bought him. A .45 caliber Smith and Wesson. He held it at his side as he stepped closer to the kid and stared him in his eyes.

"Your mom's a fuckin' crackwhore! She ain't buyin' shit but rocks. You stole that money, didn't you?"

He cocked the hammer.

"Naw, man. I-I ain't steal nuthin'. You know I wouldn't do that."

He put the gun to the kid's head.

"You about the dumbest mutherfucker I ever met. If you hadn't tried to flash the cash in my mutherfuckin' face, buyin' gold chains and teeth and shit, I might have believed your stupid ass!"

"I swear! I didn't!"

"Shut the fuck up!"

Stevie pulled the trigger.

Scratch has described this to me many times and like I said, I don't know how much of this shit is true or not, but I don't think he was lyin' about this part.

The kid's head came apart. The bullet entered right above his temple, taking off the top of his skull. The kid fell at his feet and little Stevie just stood there with the gun still in his hands, watching blood and brains flop out of the top of the kid's ruptured skull. According to Scratch, something about the way the kid's brains just came sliding out of

that big crack in his dome triggered something in him. He knelt down in the kid's blood, completely transfixed, mesmerized, and he started scooping up handfuls of the kid's brains and shoving them in his mouth. That's when he finally knew who he was. That's how Scratch put it to me. He said, "That's when I finally knew who I was, how I fit in, what my true destiny was." I thought he was just full of shit or crazy as fuck. I didn't get it. I get that shit now though.

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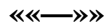
Chapter 10

“Show them a little prospect of gain to lure them, then attack and overcome them.”

—Sun Tzu, *The Art Of War*

“...There'll be times... when my crimes... will seem almost unforgiveable... I give in... to sin... because I have to make this life livable...”

—Depeche Mode



“Hey, fool! Back up off me wit’ that gat! You think that’s some kinda toy? Point the barrel at the floor ’til you ready to shoot that shit!”

“I know what the fuck I’m doin’, dog. Ain’t like this the first time we done rode on a nigga.”

Tank and I had been working for Scratch for almost four years. Dirty work. Wet work. Our job was to get bloody so he didn’t have to. We’d been doing it ever since the summer of our fourteenth birthday when we’d murdered that kid Demetrious for him. Now we were almost adults and we were the most accomplished shooters he had. Because we didn’t give a fuck. Not about ourselves or anyone else.

Four years is a long time for a shooter in the hood. Most didn’t make it six months before someone hollowed out their chest as payback for some loved one sacrificed in the name of business. Huey hadn’t joined Tank and I in our criminal venture. He should have. For a guy who wasn’t getting paid for it, it seemed like he was always poppin’ shots at someone. Usually it was for disrespecting his girl. He’d hooked up with Iesha a few years back and they were about to have a kid together. Still, Huey was always down to back us up if we needed help and we often did. We knew how he felt about us working for a white drug dealer, but he usually kept all that Black militant shit to himself. He’d given up on preaching to us years ago. Now he settled for just saving our asses instead of our souls. I couldn’t count how many times he’d pulled Tank and I out of some shit we’d gotten into while trying to pop some fool Scratch had taken a dislike to for some reason or another.

As Tank and I crept up the stairs of the main tower in the pentagon of dilapidated twelve story tenements that made up the Raymond Rosen projects, all I could think about was how I wished that Huey was there to get my back rather than his idiot brother.

“Just watch that shit.”

“I know what I’m doin’, dog. You just watch yo’ own shit. I ain’t shot yo’ ass yet

have I? Give a brotha some credit!”

“This ain’t no joke, Tank. This ain’t no driveby. We up in they buildin’. In their house. On the sixth fuckin’ floor no less! It’s a long way to run if we fuck up and miss and they’ve got home court advantage. They know this place a hell of a lot better than we do.”

“If we fuck up and miss then we ain’t runnin’ nowhere. Them niggas’ll smoke our asses ’fore we hit the stairs. This shit is like cap or be capped you know I’m sayin’?”

“Yeah, yeah, I know what you sayin’.”

I closed my mouth and turned my attention back to creeping up the graffiti and urine stained stairwell. Tank and I both had our guns out and perspiration was making the grip slippery.

My problem was that I wasn’t like Tank. Tank could get his hat blown off by a bullet that passed half an inch from his skull and then sit back and talk about some trick with a fat ass he’d seen on a rap video as if nothing had happened. I would be shaken for weeks after an event like that. Tank just accepted his fate. He didn’t expect to get out of this shit alive. He knew he’d probably be dead before he was old enough to vote, but as long as he had money, clothes, and hoes while he was alive then he didn’t give a fuck about tomorrow. His life meant nothing to him and no one else’s life meant more to him than his own. Tank was a truly dangerous individual.

“Don’t get all serious now, dog. I was just fuckin’ with you about us not getting’ out of here alive. I mean, *you* might get capped if you miss, but I’ll be getting my fat ass out of dodge. I may not be built like a sprinter, but I’ll turn into fuckin’ Maurice Green if a motherfucker starts tryin’ to spray my ass with some hot shit.”

Tank laughed, but I found it impossible to share in his humor. My nerves were jangling as if I’d been doused in ice water and plugged into a light socket. As grateful as I was to find that the stairway had no lights in it allowing us to creep up to the sixth floor almost completely unseen in the darkness, the night was starting to feel like another obstacle. I kept wondering what else could be creeping around in the blackness.

I started to speed up, no longer concerned with stealth just anxious to get out of the darkness. Tank trundled along behind me trying to keep up and making even more noise in the attempt. I had to slow down or risk alerting the entire building to our presence. I was sure that these dealers had lookouts and informants on every floor. At least they would if they knew what the fuck they were doing.

“Damn, dog! Slow down. I was just kidding about that Maurice Green shit.”

“Sorry, playa. I just want to get this shit over with.”

“I hear you, bro. I can barely even see you it’s so dark in here.”

Finally we reached the sixth floor and stepped out of the stairwell into the hallway. It was only slightly better lit. Light from the apartments spilled out from beneath the doors, illuminating the floor as we made our way toward our target.

We were almost there.

“How many of these mutherfuckas are up in here anyway?” Tank whispered.

“There should be about five of them up in there.”

“Nigga, you said there was three!”

“Aw, don’t bitch out now.”

“I ain’t bitchin’. You know I don’t give a fuck if there was ten mutherfuckas up in

there! They ain't nothin' but a paycheck to me."

Yeah, I knew that, and it was damn frightening. Looking at him then it was hard to believe that I'd kicked his ass when I first met him. Now he was 6'3" 240lbs of blue black muscle and fat. His nappy cornrolls spiraled down from beneath a baseball cap with "Made In The Ghetto" emblazoned across the front of it. Red checkered boxer shorts poked out the top of his black FUBU jeans. Even though I was two inches taller than him Tank was twice as thick. He looked to me at that moment the same as he did when I'd first met him... monstrous and unstoppable.

We were halfway down the hall, just yards away from the apartment we were supposed to hit, when I looked down at Tank's jeans and spotted a little green light flashing on and off. It took me a second to figure out what it was.

"Jesus Christ, dog! Are you trying to get us fucking killed?"

I snatched the cell phone off his hip and ripped the battery off of it. Then I shoved it back in his pocket. My heart was banging on my chest as if trying to escape.

"What?"

"What? Are you fucking retarded? What the fuck are you doing with a cell phone when we tryin' to creep on some mutherfuckas? Fuck would have happened if that shit had gone off and them niggas came out to see who was in the hall? There goes our element of surprise."

"My fault, dog. But you ain't gotta get all loud. What if they had heard *you*?"

"I'm still whisperin'."

"Just barely."

"Fool, stop tryin' to take the blame off your ass."

"The blame for what? Ain't nothin' happen. You just paranoid."

"Just keep quiet for you get us both killed, will you? Alright, I kick the door in and start bustin' with the Berretta. You follow with the AK and spray the whole room. Don't leave shit breathin' in there. Not even a fuckin' goldfish. I don't want nobody walkin' out that room but us."

Tank raised the AK then hesitated. He turned and looked at me with an expression on his face that was completely indecipherable. If I didn't know Tank better I would have thought it was fear.

"What's up, man?"

"I can't believe we still doin' this shit. Four years, dog! Four years of this shit. If there's drugs and money up in there we should just break with it and get our own thing goin'"

"Of course there's drugs and money in there, and don't you think Scratch knows that? You think you hard, nigga? Scratch could pay a ten-year-old to body your dumb ass. Now stop playin' and let's do this. These mutherfuckers probably heard us by now. All the fuckin' noise you've been makin'. If I get shot I'ma fuck your fat ass up!"

I kicked the door in and the smell of stale beer, sour urine, fried chicken, and cooked cocaine, tore up through my nostrils, straight down my throat, drying up my taste buds and gluing my tongue to the roof of my mouth. The first thing I saw when I looked around were two ghost-like females sitting naked in the corner of a near empty room, hollow-eyed, souls long fled their wasted flesh, passing the glass dick back and forth sucking it dry. Both of them combined wouldn't have made 30 years or a hundred

pounds. Then I saw the four overdressed hoods who were stumbling over each other trying to get to the table where their guns lay piled up; thrown there haphazardly like one would toss a set of car keys.

I knew why Tank never took this shit seriously. I get myself all worked up like we're about to bust in on Scarface or Nino Brown and what we find every time are a bunch of kids, in over their heads, playing gangster. The speed at which profits multiply peddling a product that pushes itself had catapulted many losers into the big-time. But staying there was never as easy as getting there.

These four punks had openly challenged Scratch's authority by setting up their little rock house in the same projects that Scratch dealt out of and without a purchase agreement from him, which meant they were buying from someone else, which meant they were competition, which meant they were corpses too dumb to know they were dead, just waiting to be bagged and tagged.

As I looked around I suspected that they had done it not because they thought they were hard, but because they were stupid. And here they were slippin' hard in a room filled with product, guns, and enough money to buy textbooks, school lunches, and new blackboards for an entire high school, getting their nuts off in two stank-ass teenaged pipers. I think I fired the first shot just to fight off the revulsion I felt.

The first bullet struck a fat kid with dreadlocks wearing black denim FUBU jeans with a matching jacket. He was this crew's equivalent of Tank. The kid who had nothing before he became a dealer, no clothes, no cash, no car, no bitches, and no respect. The kind of guy girls ignored and guys laughed at. Now he had blown up and had all he could conceive of with his limited knowledge of what the world had to offer. He would've rather died than go back to being a zero again. And so he did.

He had barely grasped the cheap looking Tech nine-millimeter in his chubby hands before my nine-millimeter Beretta bored a tunnel through his face. I was impressed that he'd even gotten that far. His friends were mowed down where they stood. For a second I was hypnotized by the Rorschach design the fat kid's blood and brains created on the greasy, water-stained, institution green walls. It looked like spaghetti with marinara sauce. Then Tank flew into the room behind me and the AK 47 belched death at the other three dealers. At such close range they stood no chance at all. They were torn to shreds by the torrential downpour of heated metal. I pumped bullets into them as well and they danced in the rain of heated alloy before collapsing lifelessly to the floor. Not one of them made it to their weapon.

Tank gave me that "I told you, you worried for nothing" look and winked at me as he spotted the money that was piled up in the open closet on the other side of the room where fat boy had dropped. It was like they had run out of things to buy and had just started tossing the money in the closet like dirty laundry, not knowing what to do with it.

"Yo, Tank, go check in the kitchen for they stash. I smell that shit cookin' in there. I bet they got it piled up on the kitchen table. These trick ass niggas ain't know shit about slangin'!"

Tank looked toward the kitchen and then back at the two naked whores who were staring wide-eyed at their massacred tricks/dealers. I followed their gaze and tried to make sense of the gruesome collage of bullet-riddled flesh to see what they were looking at. I thought I saw something, but the girls'screaming was muddying my thoughts and

making my head hurt.

“Shut the fuck up! Stupid ass hookers. I said, shut the fuck up! Tank, go scoop up those fuckin’ rocks and let’s get ghost.”

Tank’s eyes fondled the two silent girls sitting bare-assed on the piss smelling floor, savagely invading every inch of their exposed bodies, before he stalked off to collect the dope. Violence had that affect on him. Perhaps his murder-stimulated libido was just the need to perform a life-affirming act to wash his mind clear of the awareness of his own mortality. Maybe he was just a sick fucker who got off on death. Either way we didn’t have time for that shit. The way his eyes molested the two young crackwhores made me squirm uncomfortably. My stomach lurched when I noticed the erection tenting the front of his pants as he passed me on the way to the kitchen.

“How *could* anyone still be attracted to these dried out zombie-looking bitches?”

I turned back to staring at the bodies to be certain of what I thought I’d seen earlier, then I turned and shot the two whores dead. One of the bodies flinched as the gun went off then lay still again.

“Da fuck was that?”

“Nuthin’ nigga, just grab them rocks and get your ass in here.”

“Tell me you ain’t shoot them bitches?”

“Damn straight I did!”

“Aw, man! Fuck did you do that for?”

“To keep your dumb-ass from getting’ us both capped or busted tryin’ to get a quick nut in one of these nasty stank-ass bitches.”

“Damn, they was kind of fine too. I would have been down with some of dat young pussy.”

Fine? What the fuck was wrong with tank? Those girls were emaciated and reeking of disease.

“Just do your fuckin’ job, fool.”

I walked over to the body of the dealer I knew was still alive and pressed the Beretta to his temple.

“Get your bitch ass up, nigga! Get the fuck up *NOW!*”

My heart was jack-hammering in my chest. My nerves were live wires shooting sparks up and down my spine. I could feel the maliciousness building and rising to the surface like an undersea explosion. This fool was about to catch a bad one. He was about to wish that he had caught the first bullet right between the eyes.

I had missed one and if he’d had a gun I wouldn’t be around to ponder the shit. I had gotten lucky and luck isn’t a very reliable way to survive. I was scared and my fear was turning me mean.

“Alright, man. I ain’t strapped so don’t shoot.”

“Fool, I should waste your punk ass right now. Now get your ass da fuck up!”

Tank came rushing in carrying a half-empty garbage bag that I knew carried the rocks.

“Yo, what’s goin’ on?”

“You missed one,” I said, trying to deflect the blame onto him.

Tank’s eyes darted from me to the kid in the red and black Air Jordans who was slowly rising to his knees, shaking himself out from under the bodies of his two homies

who had died right on top of him. He was wearing a goosedown bomber jacket that had taken several hits leaking feathers out of the bullet holes.

“I ain’t miss shit! The mutherfucker’s wearing Kevlar. I guess he wasn’t totally stupid.”

Tank dropped the garbage bag and leveled the AK at the kid’s head.

“Don’t worry about this shit. This nigga ain’t goin’ nowhere. Just grab the money over there by the guns.”

I turned my full attention to the lone survivor of our assault.

“Now, muthafucka, you tryin to play possum with me? What was you just goin’ to lay in the cut until we turned our backs then try to blast us? You ain’t got to answer that shit. That’s what I would have tried to do myself.”

Tank called from the kitchen.

“All this money in here ain’t nuthin’ but ones and fives and bags of change and shit.” Tank called out, throwing down a big handful of bills like it was cheap confetti.

“That’s the money they must have got dealin’ off the street, but they had fools workin’ for them which meant they was handlin’ weight. There should be some larger bills in there too.”

“I’m tellin’ you bro, there ain’t shit in here but a couple thousand in small bills.”

“Bullshit!”

I slid the Berretta into the kid’s mouth.

“Where the fuck is the real money? Don’t make me have to ask you twice because I know I don’t stutter.”

“It’s in the freezer man.”

“Check that shit, Tank. If he’s lyin’ I’m gonna’ blast this fool a second asshole.”

“I ain’t lyin’. I swear.”

“Yeah? Well we’re about to see.”

“Ay, the money’s here, bro. Let’s take this shit and get ghost.”

“Naw. Me and this muthafucka got shit to discuss. He owes me some pain. Now, bitch, do you want to live?”

“Y-yeah, yeah, man. I don’t wanna die.” He began to sob.

“Fuck you cryin’ for? I’m about to give you a chance to live. You should be celebratin’. I could have just capped your ass. Now let me tell you about these two movies I saw once.”

A crowd had gathered outside the door. I needed to do something that would shock all of them into silence. Make them too petrified to ever think about talking to the cops. There was another reason for what I was about to do though. I wanted to send a message to the other crews as well. I wanted to make sure that no little punk ass upstarts ever got it in their heads to try dealing on our turf again.

It had become common for the police to find gang murder victims who had been horribly tortured with razorblades, cigarettes, who had teeth and fingernails missing where they had been crudely yanked out with pliers, mutilated genitals, broom sticks and glass bottles rammed into their rectums, anything to send the proper warning to the next man. “Don’t fuck with us!” I personally knew guys who had disposed of enemies by letting pitbulls tear them to pieces. I wasn’t into all of that. Honestly, I wouldn’t have had the stomach for it despite my roguish reputation. Still, I had to stay current in my

methods, which meant a certain amount of creative flair had to be employed now and then.

I knew someone had called the cops, but it would be a while before they arrived. No cop was in a hurry to come to the projects and they weren't about to come until they could assemble damn near every unit they had; not for a drug bust with shots fired. This gave me some time to deliver my message.

"See, in this one flick, there was these Japanese gangstas. One of these dudes disgraces himself and dishonors his crew so he cuts off his finger and gives it to his boss as a sign of respect. Because he did that, even though he fucked up, they didn't smoke his ass. They forgave him because they knew what kind of guts it took to cut off his own finger. It showed loyalty and balls. But then see, there was this other movie. It was about these Haitian drug dealers. Well, they castrated this mutherfucker for dissin' them. Cut his whole shit right off and tossed it to the dogs. You see what I'm tryin' to tell you here, man? You got two choices, bro. You can either be Japanese or Haitian."

I pulled out one of those cheap buck knives they sell everywhere and handed it to this petrified kid. He was just staring at it trying to pretend that he didn't know what I was getting at. But he knew. I could see it in his eyes. I saw his eyes light up as a thought came into his head. This fool would have gotten cleaned out in poker because his face betrayed everything. I knew what he was thinking before he'd fully apprehended the thought himself. I realized then that I hadn't reloaded but I didn't think the kid had the heart to do what he was contemplating anyway. I cocked the hammer back on the Berretta just to bluff him, besides, I had seen Tank pop a new clip in the AK and he was once again standing right beside me. He had all the money stuffed in a trash bag along with the rocks and the powder and was looking impatient.

"That knife ain't gonna do you much good in a gunfight, bro," I said, putting the Berretta up against his temple and watching that light of hope snuff out like a candle the instant he felt the metal touch his skin.

"C'mon, Snap! Let's just body this coward and break tha fuck out."

"Fuck dat! If he wants to live he'll give me a finger or else word to God I'm gonna shoot this nigga's dick off!"

Then it happened. A loud scream tore from the kid's throat and he brought the knife down on his thumb, cutting clean through the bone. Tears were streaming down his face as he held the finger out to me.

"Please, don't kill me. Don't kill me. Please. Please!"

He was sweating like a runaway slave and tears mixed with snot and saliva drooled from his mouth in long ropes. His eyes were bulging and fidgeting in their eye-sockets. I couldn't have imagined a more pathetic site. He had lost his mind just like that. Scared stupid.

"Yo, man, shoot this nigga. He done bugged da fuck out!"

I shook my head, trying to get the image out of my mind before it could take root and form another unwanted memory. It was too much. This shit was getting to me. I was losing the plot. It wouldn't be too long before I was a gibbering buffoon just like this fool. This shit had to stop. I had to get out.

"You shoot him. I'm out of bullets."

I snatched the bag from his hand and stumbled over the bodies and out of the

apartment, my Timberlands sloshing through the puddles of blood. I walked into a hallway crowded with spectators. I was mindless of their stares. It was a given that they would all lose their memories by the time the police rolled up. Scratch ran shit in the projects and I was his most feared enforcer and you didn't drop dime on either one of us if you placed any value at all on your life.

The AK erupted seconds after I had left the room. Tank was right behind me as I took the stairs two at a time. The whole thing had taken less than fifteen minutes, about ten minutes longer than it should have, but I knew that we still had at least another five minutes before the cops arrived. Niggas killing niggas didn't make for an emergency in North Philly. The cops down there didn't like the idea of getting in gunfights inside the buildings. Everyone in the projects hated cops, almost all of them were armed, and police were their common enemies. Every door they passed on the way up to the crime scene held the potential for a hero's funeral. All the police who patrolled these slums did was steal from the younger dealers and shake down the crack whores for pussy and head. Whenever anything serious went down they would wait until they were sure the gunmen had fled the scene before they went busting in. It was better to catch the perpetrators hours later when they were hiding under their grandmother's bed than to step into some violent drama.

When Tank and I got back to G-town I was determined that I had done my last job for Scratch. I had said that before. But this time was different. We had never done anything this crazy before, walking into the middle of a drug den with no obvious means for a quick escape and blasting away like cowboys. We had done plenty of drive-bys and even close up and personal shit. But nothing this dangerous before. If I could have gotten a job sweeping floors and cleaning toilets right then I would have taken it without hesitation, but I knew that a day or two listening to the snickers of disrespect from my peers and I'd pick up the gun again. My pride would always make me choose gunshots and blood over humility. Even if it was the blood of people the same color as me.

Huey was right. I was a sell-out. I was working for a blue-eyed devil committing genocide against my own people.

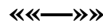
If God truly loves Black folks I'll die in my sleep. I thought as I laid down in my bed and tried to cry myself to sleep. It didn't surprise me at all when neither sleep nor tears would come.

Chapter 11

“...Nothing undermines the Christian belief in God more than the existence of evil. If God is all-good and all-powerful, how can God allow evil to happen?”

—Roy F. Baumeiste, PH.D,

EVIL, Inside Human Violence and Cruelty



Scratch was feeling desperate. Sweat bulleted down his pale face as his eyes darted from one side of the street to the other, probing every shadow for signs of life. His expression was no different than that of the drug addicts he passed. Each shambling corpse-like crack-fiend alerted his senses like a shark smelling blood in the water. His prey was somewhere close. He could almost smell her.

Trash blew down the street like tumbleweeds pushed by a gentle breeze. Packs of mongrel dogs hunted through the alleys for garbage, growling cautiously at the dope fiends who proliferated there as well. Most of the streetlights had long been broken and only one or two on each block remained lit. The night was concentrated into solid opaque curtains of black on either side of his headlights. He felt like an invading army as he accelerated through the dark, cutting a swath through the night, reveling in his alienness. Both his conspicuous affluence and his skin tone set him apart from his surroundings. He was out of place amid the honest working people who lived here as well as the welfare recipients and drug addicts. Even among the other criminals his lack of ethnicity set him apart. He liked it that way. Everything about the ghetto disgusted him. Even though it was the source of his wealth he was glad he'd never truly be a part of it. His relationship with the people who lived here was simply a predatory one. They were the nourishment he thrived on. They kept his pockets and his stomach filled.

Tonight Scratch was out alone. He had to find the whore and kill the baby without interruptions or long explanations to any of his underlings, not even Yellow Dog. Scratch was still hoping he could murder the bastard before it was born. He'd raped and killed nearly two dozen crack-whores in the last few years and still he could feel the baby's presence. It was alive and it would be born soon.

The streets were desolate. The same five-dollar whores shambled along peering wide-eyed into the Beemer hoping for a drug-dealer who's dick they could suck for a rock or two. The extravagantly dressed crack dealer waved them away like flies, his platinum custom Rolex reflecting starlight into their half-conscious faces. They were all too far gone. Their wombs were barren and dry from drug abuse and would probably never hold a seed again, least of all the one he was looking for.

Scratch drove the side streets deep in the heart of Germantown. He was far away from the Avenue now, but crackwhores could be found anywhere in G-town. He knew where every crack den and shooting gallery was for six miles in every direction. Rock cocaine's influence here was nearly omnipotent. Mothers lit up after sending their kids off to school. Fathers hit the pipe after work before coming home to face their depressed and disappointed families. Kids smoked rocks behind the gym at school. And every one of them was just one or two hits away from sucking dicks in alleys for the next rock.

Even in the more residential areas nearly every alleyway flickered with the glow of heated glass and boiling cocaine. The corners on every major intersection were crowded with dealers, talking on cell phones and eyeing every passing car for a potential customer, rival, or cop. Most of them worked either directly or indirectly for Scratch. And wherever the dealers were, crackwhores circled like buzzards sniffing carrion. But none of them were who he was looking for.

Scratch turned onto Tulpehocken Street passing row after row of small rundown houses crammed together like dominoes waiting to fall. Their windows were darkened except for one or two on each block where the flickering blue light of television sets illuminated sleeping figures or where lights were left on in front rooms and on porches to discourage burglars who preferred to work under cover of night. A massive old church squatted on one corner looking dark and ominous like the structure itself was the embodiment of God, waiting to pass judgement on the sinners proliferating around it. Scratch shook his head in amusement as he peered through the front window of the church at the enormous statue of a crucified Jesus with skin as pale as his own. He wondered how it felt to worship a God rendered in the image of the race that had oppressed your kind for centuries. Perhaps the Black people who lived here took some comfort in seeing the most powerful white man on earth nailed to a cross and bleeding to death. Scratch laughed out loud when he saw the familiar glow of a crackpipe coming from behind the tall hedges surrounding the church. Crack had made church all but obsolete. Both heaven and hell were now just one hit away.

The BMW turned down Ambrose Street and Scratch smiled. This was where his most feared enforcer lived. He wondered if Snap was still awake. He thought maybe he should take the kid with him if he was going to start crashing crackhouses, but he knew that Snap and his partner Tank had just finished taking down a rival drug crew and were probably already drunk or high and trying to sleep it off. He cruised silently past Malik's house chuckling over the irony of the man working.

"I should have that nigga, Snap, snuff the baby. I'll see how down he really is. Even after all the fools he's bodied, he still believes in some kind of redemption. I bet you puttin' a bullet in a pregnant woman will kill all that noise." He laughed again as he turned the corner.

His headlights slashed across the road illuminating a woman wearing tight jeans that had probably been baggy at one time, but were now so restrictive that she couldn't button them or zip them up in front. Her swollen belly protruded through the open fly with her T-shirt riding high above her navel. She wore plastic flip-flops on her feet and Scratch could tell by the way she shuffled that she'd been hooked on drugs for a long time. Scratch pulled the car up next to her.

"Want to smoke with me?"

He held a glass pipe out the window with a rock of cocaine already loaded inside. He watched the pregnant woman's eyes widen and seize on the crackpipe.

"Nuh, no. I can't. I've got to stay clean for my baby."

She was still staring at the pipe and almost drooling.

"When was the last time you had a hit, huh? A week ago? Two days ago? Quitting now ain't goin' to do a damn thing to help your baby. The damage is already done. So why don't you get in here and suck on this dick. The glass one and this one." Scratch unzipped his fly and pulled out his penis.

"I ain't no fuckin' whore! I got a job. You suck your own dick. Now get the fuck away from me!"

"Sorry, bitch, but I ain't got no more time to play around with you."

Scratch slid out of the BMW. The woman tried to run, but being in her third trimester slowed her down and Scratch seized her by her hair and dragged her to the floor.

"Helllllp! Raaape! Raaaape!"

Scratch smiled at her revealing two rows of gold plated teeth. Then he brought his fist down into her face sending several of the woman's teeth tumbling down her throat. He struck her again and again until he realized that she wasn't going to stop screaming until he killed her. It didn't matter anyway. People tended to mind their business in this neighborhood.

Let the bitch scream. I'm still taking that ass.

He used his hands and his teeth to rip off her jeans and shirt. The woman's breasts were enormous, bloated with milk. Scratch latched onto them with his fourteen karat canines greedily sucking them dry and biting into the massive glands until both blood and milk drooled down his face. He caressed her swollen stomach with a hand studded with platinum rings as he slid her jeans down to her ankles. He then took himself in hand and forced himself inside her tearing his own foreskin as much as her vaginal walls and caring equally little about either. Scratch sucked all the fluid from the woman's breast as he drilled up inside her. His modest erection continued to grow in proportion to his excitement as if engorged by the same blood he was draining from her breast. When he finally grew tired of her screams he withdrew his cock, pulled out his knife, and cut open her belly. He reached up inside of her, pushing aside her intestines and stomach as he felt around in her womb. He then pulled out the fetus, covered in blood and amniotic fluid, sliced its head off and tossed it into the street. The woman's screams redoubled.

"MY BABY! MY BABY!!!"

"Shut the fuck up!"

He stuck both of his hands up inside her and pulled out her uterus, intestines, and whatever organs he could get his hands on,

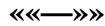
"Aaaaaarlllllgh! Noooooo!" she seized his wrists and tried to pull his hands out of her. Scratch grabbed hold of something inside of her and pulled hard, ripping it free. Her body shuddered from head to toe then lay still.

Scratch stuffed his limp penis back into his pants and climbed into his Beemer, leaving the woman's vandalized corpse bleeding on the sidewalk. He cursed aloud as he slammed the car door and stomped down on the accelerator peeling off down the somber street. Once again he had killed the wrong whore. The baby was still alive somewhere. He could feel it.

Chapter 12

“The nature of man is not what he was born as, but what he is born for.”

—Aristotle



I laid awake peeling the lead paint off the hundred-year-old window sill and watching the moon travel across the sky. The chittinous scurrying of hundreds, perhaps thousands of roaches click-clacked across the linoleum floor accompanied by the sound of large sewer rats scampering through the ceiling, bumping and thumping like they were carrying something heavy, stressing the already large cracks in the ceiling. It seemed ridiculous to me that after all the bodies I had made in pursuit of wealth I was still living like this.

I often sat with the window open on these stifling humid July nights listening to the activity out on the streets. Moans, and laughs, shouts, and laughter, off-beat rapping, bullshitting, and teasing, fighting, gunshots, and the wailing peel of the ambulance as they arrived to take away the wounded. It was all a part of my little ghetto world and it was the closest thing I'd ever gotten to a lullaby.

I would lie there trying to put faces and actions to all the noises and voices, to share in what they were experiencing. I would sit there in the dark wondering who was throwin' down, who was poppin' off rounds. And who was getting' capped. Women's sweet sighs and men's passionate grunts would drift on the thick steaming air and I would wonder who was getting fucked and why I was alone. If it was someone's wife or girlfriend. If she was enjoying herself or gagging beneath the smell of stale sweat and beer as some Neanderthal beast grunted and strained inside of her. This night however I knew that the woman who screamed out over and over again was not enjoying herself. Just as I knew the man who cursed her and struck her repeatedly wasn't in it for his own enjoyment but for catharsis. Trying to transfer his own hopelessness and fear onto someone else thinking he could free himself of the pain. Just as I knew that it wouldn't work. It never does.

A scream of mortal anguish pierced the still night air. I imagined I could hear the death rattle that followed. Whoever had been raping that woman had just graduated into murder. There was silence for a moment and I began to drift off to sleep. Then I heard it, a low chuckle that turned into cackling laugh, a familiar laugh. I could have sworn it was Scratch. But why would he need to rape a bitch when he had pussy being offered to him everyday from women desperate for his product or blinded by his cash and jewelry. It was

absurd so I dismissed the notion and by the time I woke up I had forgotten all about it.

Mom was cooking breakfast and the smell of bacon and sausage pulled me up from my bed. I was wide awake by the time the aroma of buttermilk pancakes and syrup joined the chorus of delicious fragrances. Mom was humming to a George Benson tune on the stereo while she prepared breakfast. Her voice was as warm and wholesome as the smell of the pancakes and sausage.

My Mom is the most beautiful woman I've ever seen outside of movies and television. When I was younger and the kids would tease me about my ragged clothes, nappy hair, and too wide nose, and I would wind up bloodying them and getting suspended from school, I was always proud when my mother came to pick me up. Seeing the expressions on the other kid's faces when she walked into the office with her long gazelle legs and her smooth flawless mocha skin was almost worth the ass-kicking I would get when we got home. Everyone would "Ooooh!" and "Aaaah!" as she strolled the hallways because, if I was an ugly street urchin, my mother was an African Goddess with a beauty and majesty uncommon in the ghetto. None of those kids had ever seen a woman like my mom before. There was no more lovely sight anywhere in our neighborhood. Not the way the sun set behind the projects looking like the world was on fire. Not the way the stars filled the sky from one end to another when you stood on top of the roof at Duval Manor on a summer night. She was a Goddess to us and she was mine.

In the early seventies she had been a moderately successful model and even did a brief stint as a sort of Black Vanna White for a local game show before she quit to find more stable work after she left Darryl the first time. She didn't think it was healthy for her to spend so much time away on photo shoots and thought a regular job would allow her to be the type of mother she thought I needed. It was funny to me because it seemed like we lived better when she was modeling than when she got her regular job and I definitely saw her more then despite trips to New York for modeling shows and the long hours spent filming the gameshow. Still, she remained a shocking beauty and I loved her more than anything on earth. She doesn't really speak to me anymore though. Neither does Tank and Huey's mom. They're both disgusted with my choice of occupations and they don't even know the half of it.

Mom thinks I sell drugs like every other common thug in the neighborhood. I've never sold so much as a single rock in my life, not even a joint. I kill people. Scratch had originally hired Tank and I as bodyguards but that was just the lure to get us in. We were slowly groomed to be hitters and enforcers, taking out competition, disciplining or retiring other dealers in the crew when they got out of line, eliminating witnesses before they could talk. It was all routine now.

Like Huey, Mom thinks I'm a menace to my own people. I am. I'm a menace to just about everyone, but my friends. Still, she hasn't had to walk home in the snow without winter boots or a heavy winter coat or with holes in her underwear since I started taking care of business in the streets. Grandma hasn't shed any tears over overdue bills and mortgage payments. Mom hasn't had to think about selling her body to put food on the table or clothes on our backs like many other moms in the hood often have to consider. No dating men she doesn't even like just to have someone to borrow money from should she need to. But more to the point, I didn't have kids laughing at my old, cheap, out of date clothes and calling me dirty anymore. I didn't intend on doing this

forever. The plan was to save up enough money to pay for college and pay off the mortgage on the house and then I'd be done with this shit.

"Sup, Mom?"

"Don't talk to me like one of them ignorant street niggas, boy. I ain't no damn ghetto trash."

"I just said, hello," I said shrugging my shoulders

"You said, 'Sup', like some ignorant ass street nigga. You know how to talk English you save that ghetto slang for when you're out with your drug dealin' friends."

"Well, good morning anyway."

"I don't suppose you plan on coming to church with me this morning?"

"Since when did you start going to church?"

"Since you started runnin' around in the streets and worrying me to death."

"I love you too, Mom. I gotta bounce though. If you leave before I get out of the shower the car keys are in my jacket."

"I'll walk."

"Aw, Mom come on! If you give me a sec I'll drive you and grandma."

"Your grandmother left an hour ago while you were sleeping off your hangover. Your food is on the table. I'll be back by three o'clock."

She kissed me automatically, lovelessly, then left quickly as if she couldn't stand to be in my presence anymore. My heart ached.

I showered and left without eating. The bright morning sun seared into my skull giving me an instant headache. My nerves were fraying, raw and bleeding. I needed to calm down and take my mind off my work and family. I needed some pussy.

I didn't really have a girlfriend. The truth was that I was still kind of sprung on Iesha even though she was having a kid by Huey. I still fantasized about making her mine, falling in love and treating her right. I wanted to do all the things for her I could never imagine doing for any of the cheap money-hungry hoes that got passed around the neighborhood from one thug to the next, their virtues vandalized and pillaged until they wound up catching a disease and burning some poor fool and getting fucked up so bad nobody wanted them anymore. Then they'd wind up turning to crack and selling that thang to the fools who didn't know or didn't care. It was funny how girls who nobody 'round the way would touch could still sell their ass to guys outside the hood. I had started looking at every woman I saw in the hood as just a future crackwhore. Not one of them was worth my time—except Iesha.

Deep down I knew Iesha would stay with Huey forever if for no other reason than that he was pretty and there were too few things of genuine beauty in the ghetto that didn't get spoiled quickly. Iesha would feel like it was her duty to preserve this one beautiful thing. And I was far from pretty. Sure, I had money and a brotha with cash could have just about any woman he wanted and her momma, but I wasn't about supporting a woman just for some pussy and Iesha was one of the few who wasn't like that anyway, though I might have made an exception for her.

Lately, I had been bangin' a neighborhood girl named Yolanda and, even though I knew I wasn't the only stud she was dirtying the sheets with, something about her raised her above the rest of the hood rat hoes the local thugs passed around like trading cards. Yolanda commanded respect around the way. She was not a small woman, five-foot-ten

inches tall and one hundred and eighty pounds or more. For such a big girl she was as fast as a viper. Idiots foolish enough to try to diss her usually ended up with a straight razor against their balls and her thirty-eight pressed to their temple. She was a true player who knew every aspect of the game. One hard-ass gangsta bitch.

Yolanda seemed to be involved in everything. She sold alcohol after hours that she brought over from New Jersey by the caseload. She also sold the best weed in the neighborhood. Besides that she knew everybody's business and was more accurate and reliable than the six o'clock news. She was the type of person whose name happened to pop up in every conversation. You couldn't talk about G-town without mentioning her and any argument concerning G-town street history could be settled with one word from her. No one had ever had any reason to contradict her and I doubt they ever would. Even the old-heads consulted her when it came to anything that had happened in her lifetime. Yolanda was the first woman I'd ever had and the best by a long shot. No matter how many girlfriends I had since her I always wound up back in her bed.

She was gorgeous in her own way. Big black eyes with long lashes that covered her half-lidded eyes almost completely giving her this sultry satisfied look that gave you the impression she had just gotten finished smoking a blunt or having one hell of an orgasm. Both guesses would probably be right at any hour of the day since sex and weed were her two favorite vices and she indulged them both obsessively.

Her lips were obscenely full and curvaceous as was the rest of her body. They seemed to pout, smirk, and sneer all at the same time. If she licked her lips around any group of men it was a sure bet that somebody's dick would get hard. That dick sucker pucker of hers was a perfect argument that fellatio was not an unnatural act and that at times nature even seemed to favor it. Her breasts were pornographically exaggerated. They burst through her shirts like over-ripe fruit ready to explode with nectar. She had an ass that was perfectly round and firm, but it too was exaggerated beyond all sane proportions like two basketballs squeezed together into a skirt that usually crept high up her chocolate thighs so that the bottom of each ass-cheek was visible as was the neatly manicured mons.

You could almost hear the wetness between her thighs as they swished together as if the rubbing of her own flesh against her sex kept her constantly aroused. Her lascivious curves, her movements, her voice, her attitude, even her scent was a fuck me, bitch-in-heat musk, thick with pheromones. She never wore a bra and so her tremendous mammaries bounced and swayed with her every movement. Even though she had hair that looked like it had never seen a comb, even with those worn down flip-flops she wore on her feet in the summer and the tacky white pumps she wore the rest of the time, even though her clothes were always a little shabby and she didn't look quite clean enough, or neat enough, or proper enough for anyone to ever call their girlfriend, her very essence was sexual and you'd have had to be half-dead not to notice. She had the best pussy in town and she knew it.

Yolanda had been my babysitter when I was seven and eight years old. She was only twelve years old herself then and already far from innocent. All my homies had her as a baby-sitter and almost all of us had our first sexual experiences with her. I remember she used to sit me on her lap and pretend like I was her baby. I would suckle on her breasts, which at twelve were already 44DD and she would fondle my genitals and

masturbate herself. I guess, looking back on it now, she had molested all of us. But we didn't look at it that way and still don't. If she had been a guy or something or if she had been old or unattractive then I might feel differently. As it was, I always looked forward to her visits. She made me feel special. In the hood fucking the babysitter was normal. It was just a part of growing up.

When I was ten I got my own key to the front door and Mom decided I no longer needed a babysitter. I didn't see her again until I was twelve and puberty was kicking my ass. It was her that I fantasized about when I woke up with the sheets tacky with semen. I thought I was going crazy. All I could think about was tits and asses. I used to get into fights two or three times a day just to give my mind something else to think about. Then one day during the worst of my pubescent satyriasis I went to visit Yolanda. My mind felt like it was rending itself to ribbons with tension and frustration. I thought I was turning into some kind of sex fiend.

"Boy, you just becomin' a man is all. It's how your body gets prepared for you to make babies someday. Thinkin' about sex all the time is just part of it. That's normal. Fuckin' is all men think about anyway. It's just worse for you now because you ain't really done it yet. I can take care of that for you though. Come on upstairs to my room."

She led me by the hand up to her room. I wasn't nervous at all when she undressed me. After all, it was Yolanda. She'd seen me naked dozens of times. When she touched me though, it felt better than I could ever remember it feeling.

"I'll do it for you this time. But you've got to learn to do it for yourself. If you don't learn how to jack-off you might just go crazy. All that cum might back up and clog your brain."

She started stroking me slow and steady until I felt like I was going to explode. Then she bent down and took me in her mouth. Her lips and tongue worked me into a frenzy. She slid my manhood up between her breasts while she continued to suck on me and soon I was vigorously fucking her cleavage. That first orgasm felt as if I was having a seizure. I thought I had broken something. When the semen erupted from my organ I stared at it expecting to see blood. It felt like my brain was going to shoot right out my urethra. Yolanda rubbed my cum all over her nipples. She licked the last drops of semen from my spent organ and then lifted each breast up to her lips and licked them clean as well. I was transfixed as I watched her gobble up my seed. To this day I can't get the image of her beautiful pillow-soft lips glistening with my semen or of her serpentine tongue lapping up my cum. I started going over her house everyday after that and she showed me every possible way to please and be pleased by a woman.

After I got out of Daniel Boone, Yolanda became like a surrogate mother for me since my own mother refused to speak to me after learning that I was working for Scratch. She cooked for me. She bought me clothes. She listened to my problems and offered advice. And she fucked my brains out.

As I rushed over to her house my mind was fixated on the idea of getting my head buffed by those big sexy lips and of course drenching her beautiful breasts in my cum again.

When she answered the door she could sense that something was wrong.

"Did you and your mom have another fight, baby?" she asked while reaching out to caress my face. Just the feel of her skin against mine instantly relaxed me.

“Yeah, but it’s cool. I ain’t trippin’”

“Uh huh. Look, this is me you talkin’ to, not one of those other dumb ass hoes you fuck around with. I know when my baby ain’t feelin’ good about something. You don’t need to front with me. I know you’s a hard nigga, but I know your weaknesses too. Now what is it? Is your moms givin’ you grief about workin’ for that white boy again?”

It wasn’t like Yolanda approved of me blastin’ fools for Scratch or anything. She was just a hell of a lot more open-minded about it than Moms was. She was willing to talk about it, giving genuine thought to my point of view, whereas Moms wouldn’t even talk about it. As long as I was involved with drug dealers she had nothing to say to me. Yolanda, so often the victim of harsh criticism herself, was less quick to judge and condemn. Still, that didn’t stop her from letting me know how she felt about things.

“You know that you and Huey are two of the brightest kids in this neighborhood. If ya’ll stopped fuckin’ around in the streets and took some kind of interest in school ya’ll could make something of yourselves out there. Ya’ll could be whatever ya’ll wanted to be and wouldn’t have to go around shootin’ and killin’ to do it. I always imagined that someday I’d pick up a magazine and read about you being some big-time politician or activist or something instead of another tool of the white man in the genocide of our people. I’m sorry to put it that way, but everyday I’m afraid that I’m going to look in the paper and see you in handcuffs or lyin’ dead in the streets. That would just break my heart, Malik.”

“Don’t worry, it wouldn’t make the papers anyway. I ain’t that important.”

“Nigga, why is you so damn cold? I used to change your diapers and rock you to sleep at night. I know you ain’t as hard as you front like you is. You just a little baby boy trying to imitate a man.”

“Fuck you, bitch! You don’t know shit about me. Don’t you know most fools would lose their lives for just suggesting that I’m anything less than a man? You know Malik, but you don’t know Snap and that’s me too. That’s who I am out in the street. Snap, the maddog psycho killer that everyone’s afraid of. That’s me. That’s who I am. So don’t get it twisted. ‘Cause you don’t know if I might turn around and smoke *your* ass. You keep pissin’ me off I could put a cap in you right now.”

“Anytime you feelin’ rabbit you just jump, little boy. I done put bigger dicks in the dirt than yours. I love you like you was my own kid and at the same time like you was my man, but I’d still deal with your ass like all the rest of them wannabe gangstas I’ve had to put in check over the years.”

“See, that’s just the thing, Yolanda. That’s what you ain’t feelin’ me on. I don’t want to be no gangsta. I don’t want to be no killa. If I was some white kid growin’ up in the suburbs I’d probably never touch a gun. But these are the cards I’ve been dealt. I was born into the game. This is what I am. This is all I am.”

“Oh, Malik, you can be so much more.”

“How! How am I supposed to go to school and compete with kids who eat three square meals a day when my stomach is empty? Kids who get driven to school everyday when I’m walkin’ two miles back and forth in the goddamn snow and rain and shit and even when it’s ninety degrees outside? How am I supposed to do that? How can I compete with kids who can afford to wear nice clothes everyday when I’m fightin’ everyday because all the kids are dissin’ the fucked-up hand-me-downs that I’m wearin’?”

I got to compete with kids whose mothers cook all their meals and clean their rooms and wash and iron their clothes for them and help them with their homework every night while my mom is comin' home from work exhausted every night and I'm out in the streets hustlin' to get just a few of the things they get handed to them on silver platters. Fuck that shit! I ain't got to go through all that shit now that I'm workin' for Scratch. I got money in my pockets and clothes on my back. I got my own car and a full stomach. Those white boys and those rich ass Mount Airy niggas look at me like I ain't shit 'cause I'm poor. But they all start jockin' when they see me come to school wearin' a platinum necklace that they know they couldn't wear even if their parents can afford it because someone would jack their asses for it. I'd kill every last one of them fools just for how they've made me feel all these years. Fuck all of them!"

"I wish you'd listen to your whinin' self. Nuthin' but bullshit, pussy-ass, self-pity. You got a million reasons to be out there takin' lives. Why? 'Cause you've suffered? 'Cause the white man ain't left you no opportunities? Ain't no nigga in the hood got much opportunity. Now what if we all picked up guns and started blastin' each other?"

"It'd be a lot less white boys getting over is what."

"Naw, it would be just what we have now, a lot of dead niggas and niggas in jail. We've all been hurt, disappointed, lied to, disrespected and cheated, including half the people you're out there killing. Ain't none of us had much opportunity either so does that mean it's okay for you to kill us off to get ahead? That kind of selfishness is exactly why we ain't got shit now! Talkin' 'bout bein' down for yours and getting' paid. Ya'll a bunch of selfish babies throwin' tantrums. Takin' the easy way out 'cause ya'll ain't got the guts to fight the white man. So instead you work for him and fight each other. I can't stand to see ya'll go out like suckers while those crackers just laugh and piss on your graves."

Her words stung because I knew she was right, but I felt I had no choice in any of this. She didn't understand. Killing is what I was made for. No one is this talented at something without using it. Me not killing would be like Micheal Jordan never playing basketball or Roy Jones Jr. never boxing. It seemed like my entire life had been predestined. How could I change what I was? I wanted to respond calmly and logically, but the gears in my machine were jamming, grinding against each other and heating up. My brain wouldn't work. I could feel my temperature rising. Like any cornered animal I left my defensive posture and got angry, got ignorant, and attacked.

"Bitch, fuck all that! You don't give a fuck about me! You just scared like all the rest of these weak-ass bitches! Talkin' that same bullshit Moms been runnin' for years. I ain't tryin' to hear none of it! Nigga like me don't give a fuck. You heard? I gotta get mines and you gotta get yours and if getting' mines mean takin' yours then your shit gets took. Period! End of story! I don't care if that means takin' a motherfucker's ride, his stash, or his goddamn life. It don't make no difference to me. Bitch, look around you! Fuck is there to care about around here? I ain't killin' nobody. It's this place that's killin' us all!"

I left the room so she wouldn't see the tears spill from my eyes. I left her house so she wouldn't see the murderous rage that scarred my face seconds after the tears had evaporated. She had ripped the scabs off some infected wounds and the blood had come boiling out. Emotional blood that would not coagulate but would just flow until it drowned me. I only knew one way to get rid of it and that was to make someone else

bleed. I had to transfer the pain. For the things I didn't have and never would, for the hopes and dreams I had squandered, someone was going to die. I knew it and I couldn't stop it. I didn't even want to try.

When I got home I was still upset.

“Why did she have to say all that shit? Why'd she have to run that fuckin' lecture on me when all I wanted to do was get a nut off in her fat ass and chill? I've got enough on my mind without that playa hatin' bitch puttin' salt in my game.” I was puttin' rounds in a fresh clip almost unconsciously as I gave voice to my frustration.

When Scratch knocked on the door it was a welcome distraction. His gold teeth caught sunrays and bounced them back at me, almost blinding me.

“I got a job for you, Snap.”

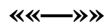
“I'm down for whatever, dog. Let's do this.”

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Chapter 13

*“...My whole world is
black and brown and closed
till I open it
with a rock
christen it with
blood...”*

—Sapphire, “Wild Thing”



“So where we goin’?”

“I need an escort. I got some business to take care of and I need someone to watch my back.”

“What type of business?”

Scratch raised an eyebrow and smiled at me. I’d heard a lot of people describe his smile as chilling, but my heart doesn’t pump Kool-Aid. I knew all about the rumors of Scratch being involved in black magic and shit. I’d seen him eat that Jamaican kid’s brains when I was a kid. But none of that stuff bothered me. I’d smoked enough Jamaican dealers who were deep into voodoo to not believe any of that hocus-pocus. It was just another trick they used to keep citizens and other dealers in check. If guns didn’t scare them then maybe evil would. Neither scared me. Scratch’s smile just looked ridiculous to me. Gold fronts went out with Flava-flav.

“Does it matter?”

“Fuck yeah it matters. I ain’t tryin’ to get killed for nobody. You don’t pay that much.”

We were doing sixty up Lincoln drive and Scratch took his hands off the steering-wheel and turned to look at me.

“I don’t scare you at all do I?”

“Man, I ain’t down for this shit. Put your hands back on the wheel!”

“Do I scare you?”

“Fuck no! Don’t nobody that breathes the same air as me scare me.”

“Are you sure?”

I pulled out the Beretta and jacked a round into the chamber. Scratch looked at the gun in amusement.

“What you gonna do with that?”

“I’m gonna put two in your forehead if you don’t put your hands back on the

goddamned wheel!”

I didn't raise the gun or point it at him. I just held the gun in my lap and glared at him murderously. You didn't point a gun at someone until you were ready to use it and I wasn't there yet. If I were to raise the Berretta up and put it to Scratch's dome I'd have to pull the trigger or else I'd be dead before the end of the night.

“Really? And how will that keep us from crashin'?”

The road turned and the BMW headed straight for the big concrete barrier that separated the Eastbound traffic from the Westbound. In seconds we would have been bright stains on the road. Scratch stepped on the gas, but still did not reach for the steering-wheel. Nevertheless the car turned and continued safely up the road. Scratch laughed.

“See, boy? I'm fuckin' magic! Relax, bro. You think I would kill us? We both got too much to live for.”

My heart was still thundering in my chest as Scratch finally regained control of the car.

“Don't do that shit again, man. That shit ain't cool.”

“I was just testin' you, man. It takes some balls to pull a gun on me. You would have killed me huh?”

“Believe it.”

“That's good 'cause I need a muthafucka with heart. There's a war goin' down and I need to know who's on my side. I need to know if you've got the stomach for the things I'm goin' to be askin' you to do in the coming weeks.”

“Why me though? I thought Yellow Dog was your boy.”

“I'm talkin' about specialty work here. This shit is too deep for Yellow Dog. He's gettin' too old for wet work. There's other things I need him for. I'm talkin' about frontline soldiers. I need assassins. Are you down?”

“It don't sound no different than what I've been doin' for you the last few years.”

“True. But it's all a matter of degrees. Like this business we got to handle today. You might think this is deep, but this ain't shit compared to what's coming. The whole world's about to change.”

“What are we goin' to do?”

Scratch's smile faded away and he just stared out the windshield. It was several moments before he spoke again. When he turned to face me there was something cold and dark in his eyes.

“You and I are going to kill the head of the Junior Black Gangsta Lords. Just the two of us.”

“Man, you are crazy? Us? Goin' after Jah Warrior by ourselves? Man, that crazy ass Jamaican and his crew will laugh their asses off while they saw our heads off. You must be sick.”

“I thought you had heart? You ain't scared of me, but you scared of some punk ass Jamaican?”

“I ain't scared of neither one of you, but I ain't suicidal or stupid neither. How the fuck we supposed to kill that nigga?”

“The same way you kill anybody. You just keep puttin' bullets in his ass until his heart stops beatin'. I'm serious, bro. I know where Jah Warrior's bitch ass is holed up and

I know where he'll be goin' in about twenty minutes. See, that muthafucka is an undercover faggot. He's got this Filipino 'mo he's been tappin' for a few weeks now. He can't let his boys know about it 'cause they'd take it as a sign of weakness and cap his ass. So he sneaks off by his self like everyday. This muthafucka is a fiend for that boy-pussy. This kid he's fuckin' is only sixteen years old, the sick fucker!"

"And how do you know all this shit?"

"'Cause I know the little Flip that he's been fuckin'. We go to church together you might say?"

"Man, don't start with all that Satanic shit. You know I don't buy that crap. Just 'cause you ain't crash the car don't make you Mephistopheles."

"Yeah, I know you don't believe. But a lot of folks do and they're loyal to me, which is good for both of us. Once we smoke this muthafucka we ain't got shit to worry about. With the Gangsta Lords gone we own the streets. You won't need to wear that Kevlar vest no more. Ain't that shit hot?"

I peeled up my shirt and ran my hand over the vest I had strapped on underneath.

"Yeah, but them bullets is hotter."

"You should really think about joining the faith, bro. There's a lot more power to be had than what comes out of the barrel of a gun."

"Yeah, there's what comes out of a wallet. Now how much is you payin' for me to do this shit?"

"Two gees. Same as always."

"Naw, man. This here is too big for some measly ass two gees. You need to come up off like ten for this one."

Scratch looked at me long and hard. He reached into his shirt and pulled out a dried cobra's head that he had dangling from a necklace. He rubbed it, seemed to be fondling the thing as he stared right through me. I could almost feel his eyes in my chest fluttering around my heart. I could feel his breath inside my head crawling over my brain.

I wanted to yell for him to cut it out, but he wasn't doing anything. He was just rubbing that nasty snake head. Still, if he didn't stop I *would* blow his head off.

"Alright, playa, you got your ten gees. Now, is you ready to do this 'cause we almost here?"

We pulled off the freeway in North Philly and cruised down Columbia Avenue. Children, mothers, grandparents, hard working honest citizens, walked the streets right alongside gangsters, drug dealers, prostitutes, and pimps. Half-dead crackheads and junkies mingled freely with churchgoing Christians and killers and predators stalked unnoticed amongst their prey. Here crime was so normal that criminals blended seamlessly into the fabric of everyday life.

I was surprised when we parked the Beemer in front of a dilapidated row home with boarded up windows and crumbling front steps that could only have been a crackhouse. The front door was missing and shadows shambled about just beyond the light of day. I had been expecting to pull up at a motel or an apartment building or something.

"They fuck in here?"

"No. I just need to check something out first."

Scratch hopped out of the Beemer and I quickly followed. I didn't know what we

were doing here, but it couldn't be good. The smell of burning cocaine mixed with the rancid stench of unwashed bodies and surrounded us like a fog. I covered my nose and breathed through my mouth.

"Don't act like a pussy, Snap. These people pay your bills." Scratch hissed as he walked from room to room looking over every female in the place.

"Who are you looking for?"

"I'll know when I see her."

"Don't tell me you lookin' for some pussy up in here? I know you can do better than this."

"Some of the best pussy you will ever find is right here rotting away in these places. Models, cheerleaders, porn stars, school teachers, doctors, lawyers, nuns. Yeah, they all wind up here and they do stuff for this rock that you'd be ashamed to ask a regular whore for. But no, I ain't lookin' for pussy. Let's go." Scratch looked around one last time and I could tell he was clearly disappointed about whatever he had been hoping to find in there. Then he led me back outside.

We crawled back into the Beemer and sped off. A few minutes later we were pulling up in front of the Richard Allen Projects.

"Man, you didn't say nothin' about going to the projects. This is where all those JBGL niggas hang. We gonna get killed before we ever see JahWarrior."

"They don't even come around this street. That's why Jah had his little boy toy put here. Because he knew nobody would see him creepin' way over here."

It was a single story little cottage that was probably charming when it had first been built. Now it was piss and water stained, graffiti covered the walls, and weeds choked the lawn in front where the foliage had not been worn away by foot traffic and decades of neglect. The screen door hung from a single hinge and the screen itself was ripped and torn, defeating the whole purpose of having the door in the first place.

"This kid must have really come from the gutter to think this place is a step up."

"Jah must not be here yet. I don't see his car."

"Damn, Scratch, you tellin' me you ain't never creeped before? You don't park your ride in plain sight when you dippin' in something you don't want nobody to know you dippin' in. Ain't no way he's gonna park his car right in front of the crib if he's in there fuckin' another dude."

"True dat. Alright then, we assume he's in there. So how do we approach?"

"We creep around back and listen for the sounds of passion. Once we know that he's in there getting' busy we go in blastin' and catch his ass with his pants down. Let him die with his dick in that faggot's ass or vice versa. That right there will kill the Gangsta Lord's credibility in the hood when it gets out that their leader was a 'mo. If they ain't fuckin' we pose their asses like they was anyway."

"I knew I liked you for a reason, Snap. I think you're even more vicious than I am."

Scratch killed the engine and we both stepped out of the ride and approached the little townhouse, careful to stand clear of the windows. I was nervous about not having the car running, but not nearly as nervous as I'd be if we had to make a fast retreat and we ran out to find that some kids had taken the Beemer for a joyride. I was even more nervous about Scratch's personalized license plate. Why anyone would drive such a

distinctive vehicle to a homicide made no sense to me, but I figured that Scratch wanted everyone to know who'd ended Jah Warrior's life. More fodder for his considerable rep. The fact that his ride might alert the rest of the JBGL to his presence on their turf was a secondary concern for him. For me it was primary though. I didn't like anything about this scene.

I didn't like the way the dry grass and loose gravel crunched loudly under our boots as we walked around to the back of the house. I didn't like the sheets that covered the windows preventing me from seeing what was going on inside. I really didn't like not having Tank there to cover my back with the AK. None of that could be helped though. It was time to put in work.

The back yard was littered with garbage. There would be no way to cross the yard without making a racket. I held up a hand for Scratch to halt while I considered our options. Bottles and cans littered the ground everywhere along with old toys and car parts.

"Shit! We're gonna' have to do this like the PD. You go through the front and as soon as I hear you kick in the door I'll come through the back blazin'. Don't start shootin' until I do. I ain't tryin' to get hit by no friendly fire. We cool?"

"You the man with the plan today, Snap. However you call it."

"I just want us both walkin' out of here alive."

"I like that plan."

I watched Scratch walk back around to the front of the house and poised myself so that I could get to the back door in seconds after Scratch came through the front. I crossed the yard slowly, tip-toeing in between piles of debris until I could go no further. I was right in the middle of the yard. Exposed. If someone looked out the window right now they'd spot me right off. The Berretta was in my hand and loaded with fifteen Black Talons I'd bought from a crackhead cop I knew. Even if Jah fucked with his vest on he was still a dead man.

From where I stood I could see through one corner of the back window where the sheet wasn't tacked down. I was looking right into the bedroom. Two bodies undulated on a bare mattress in a familiar violent rhythm. Jah was getting' himself some ass. I hoped that Scratch would be quick because I wasn't sure how long Jah's stamina would hold out. They were going at it pretty hard in there.

Moments later I heard the sound of a shotgun going off and I knew that Scratch was making his move. I crossed the yard in a heartbeat and smashed right through the window landing right on top of Jah and his lover.

The room smelled of sweat, ass, and Astroglide. They both screamed as glass rained down on their naked bodies and I slammed into them and knocked them sprawling off the little twin bed onto the floor. The boy was still screaming as Jah's enslimed penis was unceremoniously extricated from the kid's bleeding asshole.

Jah Warrior was not a small man. He was about two-hundred and twenty pounds and almost all of it was muscle. He had been a pro-boxer before he became a drug lord and I knew that he was fully capable of beating me to death. I struggled to get to my feet and raise my gun, but my legs had somehow gotten tangled in a blanket and some sheets they must have ripped off the bed in their passion. Luckily Jah was still entwined with his lover and having just as much trouble freeing himself from the tangle of limbs.

"What tha fuck?" It was all he had time to say before Scratch entered the room

and aimed the shotgun at his head.

“Hello, Jah. You’d better tell your bitch to shut up if he wants to live.”

“Don’t kill me! I am loyal to you. You are the dark Lord. The Morning Star. I am your loyal servant forever. You promised me power, a high seat in the hierarchy of hell!” The boy’s eyes were wide with fright and wet with tears. His voice shook as he spoke and his body trembled.

“What da fuck you talkin’ ’bout?” the big Jamaican asked as he sat on the floor with his impressive organ still swollen and erect as if he was just waiting for us to leave so he could finish sodomizing his little playmate. “You sell me out? You make a deal wit’ dis peckerwood?” He started to rise and Scratch cocked the shotgun.

“Settle down there, Rastaman.” He turned to address the Fillipino kid who was growing hysterical. “You’re right, Micheal. You’ve been very loyal to me and I did promise you that you would be rewarded for it with an honored place in hell. Now, I want you to go there first and wait for me.”

He unloaded both barrels into the boy’s face taking his head clean off his shoulders and sending a shower of brain and bone all over Jah.

“Noooo! Fuck you, mon! Fuck you! You nah ’ave to do that! Your beef is wit’ me. He ain’t done nut’ing to you, mon!”

“You should be thanking me, Jah. Your little butt buddy gave you up and I ain’t have to pay him a dime. He did it because he thought I was Satan. See, he was raised Catholic and so he thought he was going to hell already for being gay and letting you pack his shit everyday. He thought that if he helped me I’d be able to make his stay in hell a little more comfortable. What do you think, Jah? You think I’m the devil.”

Jah Warrior didn’t answer Scratch. Instead he turned his attention to me.

“Ow can you work for this creature? Don’t you know what he is? Can’t you see what master you’re serving?”

“I serve the same master you do muthafucka, the almighty dollar bill. Time to say goodnight now.” I pointed the gun at his head. Scratch cocked the shotgun again. He aimed it at Jah’s erection, which had finally diminished after the death of his lover.

“I’ll see you in ’ell white boy. You too, ’ouse nigga!”

When we were done pumping rounds into him he was not even recognizable as a man.

Clumps of powder burned flesh littered the floor from where the shotgun had disintegrated it from the two mangled bodies. Molecules of blood floated in the air and pools of it soaked into the mangy carpet. Both corpses were missing most of their skulls and their torso’s were punctured and gouged, so riddled with bullets that they were literally falling apart.

“You’d better go on back to the car. I don’t think you want to see the rest of this.”

I looked at the brain matter coating the walls and floor and my stomach roiled.

“Are you going to eat that?”

Scratch raised an eyebrow quizzically and looked deep into my eyes trying to read me. I purposely kept my expression neutral.

“Eat what, Snap?”

“Eat their brains. Are you going to eat their brains?”

I could see the surprise cross Scratch’s face even though he too was struggling to

keep his face emotionless. His eyes narrowed as he regarded me even closer, scrutinizing my face for some clue to my thoughts. Then he smiled and eased back, but his eyes still did not leave my face.

“I’m going to have to keep my eyes on you, Snap. You know a lot more than you let on.”

“Why do you do it? Just to convince the Jamaican posses that you really are the devil? More of that voodoo shit?”

“It’s just part of the ritual, man.”

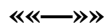
Scratch reached his hand down into Jah Warrior’s ruptured skull and scooped out the stringy pink pulp that was all that was left of his brains, except for what was now oozing down the wall in back of him. I decided to take his advice and wait out in the car. I was just stepping out of the room when I heard the wet smacking sounds as Scratch consumed his prize.

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Chapter 14

“...I don’t think anyone expects a sheep to go into the den of the wolf and love the wolf, because the sheep would wind up in the stomach of the wolf.”

—Malcolm X



Scratch dropped me off in front of Yolanda’s house with my pockets fat with ten thousand dollars in cash.

“You done good today, playa. I’ll see ya around. I might have another job for you soon.”

“Yeah, okay. Just let me know.”

The gold encrusted red BMW took off down the street creeping slowly. I could see Scratch watching me in his side mirrors as he rolled down the block. He was smiling again. I turned and walked up the steps to Yolanda’s front door.

“What you want now?”

“Shut the fuck up,” I said as I grabbed her in my arms and dragged her back into the house kissing and undressing her. I kicked the door shut while lifting her dress over her head and dropping my pants. By the time we made it to the bedroom we were both completely naked.

I turned her around and bent her over the back of an overstuffed chair in the middle of the room. We made love violently, angrily. We didn’t speak, no apologies, no explanations, we just fucked hard and angry, saying with our bodies what pride prevented us from speaking. We scratched, spanked, and bit each other, shifting seamlessly from one position to the next, from the chair, to the floor, to the bed, as we hammered out orgasm after orgasm until we both collapsed sweating and quivering into each others arms.

I was laying in her bed, still inside her, looking at the semen glistening on her lips and pooling in her belly button, when the doorbell began ringing frantically and Huey’s voice called out from the street.

“Yo, Malik! Yolanda! C’mon and open up! I know that pussy can’t be that good that you got to spend all day up in it. Bros before hos, remember, Snap? Bros before hos.”

A wide grin spread across my face as I rolled out of bed and tip-toed barefoot across the splintering hardwood floor. The window rattled loudly as I yanked it open.

“Man, what you want, Huey? Makin’ all that muthafuckin’ noise down there. You pullin’ me right up out the pussy.”

“Fuck that old tired pussy! Over-sexed hooker gets too much dick as it is. Shit, don’t you know you gotta make them miss it sometimes? That bitch ain’t missed a day of

dick since she was twelve. She done got spoiled on it.”

“Fuck your little yellar ass, nigga. You *wish* you could get some of this pussy.” Yolanda yelled from behind me.

“If that nigga don’t get da fuck down here I might just come up there and break your big black ass off with some of this.” It was kind of funny to see Huey clowning with Yolanda. It was a mood you didn’t see from Huey everyday. He was usually so serious and intense. I was enjoying their little verbal sparring match.

“You ain’t gonna do nuthin’ with that little yellar dick of yours.”

“Hooker, I’ll slap you in your fat-ass mouth with this yellar dick!”

“Little yellar dick, nigga. Little yellar dick.”

I came out the front door and shook Huey’s hand.

“Man, why that bitch of yours always got to have the last word on everything?”

“Why you always got to be antagonizing her?”

We started walking off down the street before Huey even told me where we were going or what he wanted.

“I’m just fuckin’ with the bitch. Besides, I hate how that hooker always tryin’ to play mommy to everybody. She thinks she knows everything and she ain’t shit herself. Sittin’ on her fat ass sellin’ beer and weed and collectin’ welfare checks. You can do much better than that shit, bro.”

“I could have Iesha, but, since you got her, Yolanda is about the best thing going.”

Huey knew how much I cared about Iesha so he just let the matter drop. In all the years Huey and I had been friends we never argued, mostly due to Huey’s deft handling of my volatile moods, but lately we’d been disagreeing more frequently.

“So, peep this, bro. I’m bored out of my muthafuckin’ mind and Iesha’s getting on my goddamned nerves. I was thinkin’ we could go on one of them payback missions up in the Northeast like we used to do you know?”

It had started back before we all got arrested and sent to reform school. Huey and I would go on these missions in the white neighborhoods. What we would do is go up to Northeast Philly and beat and rob white folks on their own turf just to let them know that there was no insulation from the streets. We wanted to let them know that just because they lived across town from us didn’t mean they were safe from us. It didn’t mean they could ignore us.

It started when my homeboy dirty Frank got stabbed. Frank was a thief who was too stupid to go outside the neighborhood. He would steal from his own neighbors. Any fool could figure out that nobody was making a special trip to our poor-ass little community to steal a few used TVs, stereos, and VCRs. So, anytime something came up missing you’d more than likely be able to recover it by knocking on Frank’s door. I had to step in his ass once myself over my Mom’s VCR, but still he was my boy.

Frank and I went to grade school together and he used to live right across the street from me when he was staying with his grandparents while his mom was in rehab kicking heroin. He still lived only two blocks away and in G-town that almost made him family. Then, one day, he gets stabbed right in front of the police station in broad daylight and his attacker just walks away. Police just yards away saw nothing and no one was ever apprehended. Even worse, as Frank lay bleeding from a gut wound, the cops searched him and then harassed him about a couple vials of rock they found in his pockets, treating him

like a suspect instead of a victim. Frank could have died and nobody would have been convicted. There would have been no story on the eleven o'clock news, no public outcry, and no change in police policies and procedures.

Nothing ever changed for the better until it started happening to white folks and they began writing letters, and calling their congressman, and talking to the newspapers, and threatening lawsuits. So we decided to make it happen to white folks. We decided to bring the ghetto to their doorsteps. That very night, while Frank was having his intestines stitched together at Germantown Hospital, Huey and I took a bus up to Northeast Philadelphia for some payback.

In our neighborhood the Northeast was endearingly known as "Whitey Land". It was notoriously racist, home to the KKK, skinheads, a Nazi biker group, and several other White Power organizations. Back then most people believed that a Black kid would have had to have a deathwish to walk through that neighborhood. It was perfect for what we wanted.

We imagined fat rednecks sitting at home watching Black kids dying in the streets and simply changing the channel, not giving a fuck about drugs and crime as long as it stayed in the ghettos and out of their lily white neighborhoods while their own kids were in the backyard smoking meth and huffing paint. To them every Black casualty was just one less nigger to compete with for jobs and women. It enraged us to imagine them living safe and comfortable while our homeboys bled to death in front of police stations and no one seemed to care. So we were going to give them a taste of the fear and anxiety, the helplessness and frustration and impotent rage that we all lived under. We meant to bring the fury of the Black ghettos into Whitey Land and plop it raw and bleeding on their doorsteps.

We started out robbing other kids of their cash, jewelry, clothes, and sneakers, we even rolled some fool for a can of Pepsi once. It wasn't about the goods or the money. It was all about payback. We actually believed we were doing some good in some grand karmic way. We thought we were giving balance to the universe. It was about not allowing the middle-class to forget about those below the poverty level that they left behind imprisoned in economic dungeons, boiling in nihilistic rage and desperation as we waited out our life-sentence. Sometimes we didn't even jack them for their money at all. We just beat them down on general principles.

The last time we went on one of these missions we succeeded only in chasing ever larger groups of white teenagers around. They were all too cowardly to fight even though in one case they outnumbered us nearly five to one with nine to our mere two. White boys weren't like brothas around the way. They didn't have the same manhood issues we did or if so they certainly managed to handle it better. In the hood you don't have much but your respect and most of us would kill or die for it. These kids had everything so losing a little face to a couple grimy-looking Black thugs meant little to them. They could always tell themselves that we probably had guns or that we were on PCP and they wouldn't miss a moment of sleep over it. We thought they were all a bunch of candy-assed over-privileged pussies and every time they ran from us increased our anger. Tonight we weren't about to be denied.

Huey and I left Yolanda's house and walked down Green Street to Cheltenham Ave to catch the J-bus up to Frankford. We both had our gats on us, but we had no intention of

using them unless we suddenly found ourselves surrounded by the Klan or something, which wasn't likely. This wasn't the South and we weren't some passive, Jesus-whipped, handkerchief head niggas that would hide in the closet and pray while Klansmen burned the house down. If we ran into the KKK there would be a fuckin' white sale in the hood that night.

After we got off the bus it started to rain so we walked quickly up Frankford Ave, afraid that the rain would chase any would-be victims in-doors before we could get to them. We walked up the street with no umbrella for nearly an hour with no luck. The streets were deserted. We were just about to give up and go home when we passed a Burger King and some fools yelled out, "*Niggers!*" It was the first time I could remember being so happy to hear that word.

This was what we had been waiting for. We didn't know who had said it. We didn't know how many there were or how big they were. We didn't know if they had guns and knives or pitch forks and torches. We didn't care.

We ran into the parking lot in back of the Burger King where about a dozen white kids stood, sat, and leaned on their cars. About eight of them were boys with another five girls with them. I was less pissed off that they had yelled nigger than by the fact that kids that young already had cars. I was sure that none of them had ever had to kill anyone to get it either.

They looked like wet alley dogs. Their stringy hair was plastered to their faces and dripping with rain. Even through the rain I could smell their fear. For not the first time or the last it amazed me that these pale, anemic-looking creatures could have conquered and enslaved anyone, especially my proud Black race. Even the biggest one among them, who was clearly Tank's equal in size, struck no fear in my heart. They just looked pathetic and pitiful in their faded Levis, wrinkled Heavy Metal T-shirts, and scuffed Doc Martins.

How could people with so much money dress so poorly? I wondered.

"Who tha fuck said that?" I growled.

The girls looked genuinely frightened. They were expecting a serious brawl to break out. Obviously, they knew their own people less than we did. These weren't poor crackers from Fish Town, or crazy Irish sons of bitches or Italians from South Philly. Those bastards were just as hard as we were. These were rich WASP kids, or at least middleclass, which, in our eyes, made them rich. They didn't know shit about the street. They didn't have to. They were insulated by their money and their little middleclass neighborhoods. The only thing they knew about violence was what they heard in rap songs and watched in movies. They weren't going to fight when there was a chance they could run or talk their way out of it. If one of them spoke up none of his boys would back him up and they all knew it. They'd just stand there petrified while the two of us beat one of their homeboys half to death.

No one said a word as we stalked in between them glaring at each one of them. Huey was in a rage to hurt someone, not for what they had yelled but for a thousand other offences they had indirectly committed against him. He wanted to kick someone's ass for the sins of the entire White race. He grabbed the biggest muthafucker among them, just 'cause he looked like he was thinking about challenging us, and began to beat him like he owned him.

"You said that shit didn't you? DIDN'T YOU? You white peckerwood

muthafucker!”

Huey launched into him so viciously that three of his boys actually steeled their hearts to confront us, but I knocked one of them out cold with the butt of my nine millimeter and slowed their roll with the quickness.

“Don’t none of ya’ll bitches try to jump in that shit. Unless somebody wants to fess up and take the beating this big pussy’s takin’,” I looked from one face to the other. One by one they dropped their heads, “I didn’t think so. Ya’ll just gonna let your boy here take the ass-whippin for you, huh? Pussy ass muthafuckas,” I hissed.

They all backed up and just stood there watching. The big White boy that Huey was dealing with ran straight at him with his fists cocked back in what looked like some super-hero pose. The comic book stance left his midsection exposed to Huey’s devastating kicks and punches. The wind exploded from the big kid’s lungs and he doubled over grimacing in agony as Huey’s shin slammed into his ribcage with a sound like a baseball bat hitting a watermelon. He kept coming though. I’ll give him that. There were tears running down his cheeks from the pain, frustration, and humiliation. He tried to close the gap and grapple with Huey, but no way was Huey going to let this big cracker get his meaty paws on him. The guy took so many blows trying to get a grip on Huey that by the time he grabbed hold he was too weak to do shit and Huey simply slung him to the ground. The guy fought hard though. Somehow he managed to get back up.

There were cuts above and beneath both of the white boy’s eyes, which were rapidly swelling shut. His lip was busted, his nose was broken, and he was holding his side where Huey had kicked him and I suspected that at least one rib was broken. Still, the guy managed to surprise me by actually landing a few solid punches on Huey this time as he lunged clumsily forward. Huey’s nose started bleeding profusely and soon his face was covered with it. I started to get worried when I saw Huey stagger a little after the last punch caught him right on the chin. The White boy’s friends cheered at this latest development and I was so angry it took everything I had to keep my finger from squeezing the trigger on the nine which was once again tucked away in my pocket. Then Huey grinned, with a mouthful of blood, and teeth turned a crimson hell. It was the most evil expression I had ever seen. Even the big cracker’s friends stopped cheering. They knew their friend was about to catch a bad one.

This time Huey charged. He grabbed the big kid by his hair and brought his knee down into the boy’s face repeatedly, his body a frenzied blur of savage motion until the kid slumped unconscious to the blacktop. Still, even after the white kid was unconscious, Huey continued to smash knees and elbows into the guy’s face in a blind rage. The kid’s skull began to lose shape as bone was pulverized.

“Huey! No! Stop! Stop! You’re going to kill him!”

Blood had started running from the White boy’s ears, nose and mouth, and he had started convulsing.

“We got to get out of here, bro!”

I snatched Huey off of him. The kid’s face was destroyed. It had lost all integrity and was little more than a bleeding pulp of hair and skin. It was the most gruesome sight I had ever witnessed. I barely pulled it together in time to run. I had frozen in anticipation, waiting to see if the kid’s brains would run out of his ears.

We took off back the way we had come and left the kid bleeding in the Burger

King parking lot surrounded by his horrified friends who were too scared to even scream. They stared in mute shock and didn't even see us leave. I was in shock too as we ran. I felt like I was in a dream.

He did it with his bare hands. He killed that kid with his bare hands!

There was no doubt in my mind that I had just witnessed a murder, a barbaric and senseless murder of incomprehensible savagery. No way could that kid have survived a beat down like that. If he did he would never be the same again.

My feet barely touched the ground as we ran. I was high on adrenaline and the smell of blood and fear—the spectacle of violence.

My God, what did we just do?

It wasn't that I felt sorry for him or felt any guilt or remorse whatsoever. *Fuck a white boy!* What really had me trippin' was the degree of hatred a person would have to have in their hearts to do that to someone with their bare hands. I could never imagine hating anyone like that unless I had loved them first or they had hurt someone I loved. To do that to a complete and absolute stranger who'd done nothing to me I'd have to be insane. I'd capped fools plenty of times, but this was hands on, it was intimate, passionate. Not the cold detachment of pulling a trigger. Shootin' a fool you could almost imagine that it was the gun and not you that had killed him. But...this? The blood was literally on his hands. That type of hate completely defied my reason.

It occurred to me that Huey had problems that ran far deeper than anything anyone could see. There was something monstrous and cruel in him. Maybe we all had problems like that, deep down. Because, as monstrous and inhuman as Huey seemed to me right then, I had still killed three times as many people as he had in the last year alone. If Huey was a psychopath then what the fuck was my excuse?

We ran all the way back down to Frankford Ave. I trembled and paced back and forth looking over my shoulder for the police. If the bus didn't come soon I was sure I would have lost my mind.

“Settle down, man! You look guilty as fuck.” Huey was laughing.

“I think you killed that White boy, playa.”

“If only the whole race had one neck, huh?”

“Nah, bro, I'm serious. That dude is deader than disco. That was some ill shit back there.”

Huey looked me up and down, sneering with contempt.

“Fool, I know damn well you ain't cryin' like some little bitch over no dead peckerwood? How you gonna be out there killin' brotha's all over the street for that devil you and Tank work for then start trippin' when we finally do a devil who deserved to get done?”

I stared sheepishly at my feet, unable to face his accusatory eyes. I certainly didn't feel any grief over that White boy's death. I was just worried because of how the law looks at it. Cops didn't trip when niggas capped niggas, least of all when it was drug related, but when two Black roughnecks beat a middleclass suburban kid to death in front of his friends in a good safe neighborhood like the Northeast, shit definitely hit the fan. Killing a White boy wasn't no casual thing and I didn't really appreciate being made an accessory to it without even being asked first. Still, true homies backed each other up right or wrong and I wasn't about to desert my boy now. We'd been through too much

shit together. Besides, I couldn't really explain to Huey that my biggest reservations came from a fear that he was insane and the knowledge that to society any ten of the niggas I murdered in the streets didn't compare to killing one White kid.

"I don't know, man. That shit was just a little deep."

"Naw, brotha. That shit you do is deep. You out there killin' your own fuckin' people at the whim of some power crazy white devil. That shit is deep. What I just threw down was revolutionary! That was taken out reparations on a devil's ass!"

Huey was standing up and glaring at me with his face contorted into some bizarre combination of a snarl and a grin. Spittle flew from his lips as he barked out his words. The bus had pulled up now and people were exiting and staring at us as Huey raged and roared. I pulled Huey close and whispered to him trying to calm him down.

"Yo, nigga, chill! You tryin' to get us arrested? Let's get on this bus and get the fuck out of here before the cops roll up."

"I ain't your goddamned nigga!" Huey shouted backing away from me and shrugging my arm off his shoulder, "If that's what you wanna be then you can call yourself that, but I got better things to do than be a nigga all my life."

Huey's eyes beamed hate and shined with an almost religious fervor as he spoke. I was still glancing over my shoulder looking nervous and scared. Huey hissed and rolled his eyes in disgust. He turned his back on me and walked onto the bus.

I walked behind him and sat down next to him staring out the window. I felt foolish. I knew I had just lost much of Huey's valued respect. He didn't look at me for the rest of the ride. Instead he stared at every white face on the bus challenging them with his eyes, daring them to return his contemptuous glare as if everyone of them had done him some personal wrong.

If only the whole race had one neck.

He had meant it. There was no doubt that he would murder every Caucasian in existence were it possible, including the half that was inside of him. That much hate just couldn't be healthy.

Huey's message would have affected me a little deeper if it wasn't for the fact that he was such a cold-hearted killer himself. Even though he cried and poured out a little liquor for every brotha he killed it still seemed to me like the pot calling the kettle black. If he'd never killed another Black man and had only killed White people I might have bought his revolutionary stance, but I knew that the kid he'd pummeled back there was the first White person he'd ever done, but it wasn't his first homicide. Still, my conscience was ringing and I couldn't wait to numb it into silence with a couple of Colt 45s, a fat ass blunt and some of Yolanda's talented head. I couldn't wait to get away from Huey. It would be a long time before he and I kicked it again.

««—»»

The flames crawled down the Marijuana filled cigar, eating it slowly away as I sucked its senses-dampening vapors down into my lungs and tried to forget about my life.

Yolanda wasn't home so I had hooked up with Tank. I passed the forty to him and he tilted it up like it was Gatorade and he'd just finished a marathon.

Tank and I sat down in the playground of Lingelbach Elementary School where he and I had first met years ago. We didn't speak, instead we indulged in that timeless male ritual sucking our emotions down into a dense fog of inebriation, down into the dark emotional chasm where every pain we'd ever endured festered. It was a reservoir that was far from infinite and would need to be emptied soon before it erupted violently outward. The cold bitter taste of the beer washed over my tongue and scrubbed away the faces of the vengeful dead. When the blunt was passed back to me I sucked it down to a roach. I was as high as I could get, but it wasn't enough. I still couldn't shake the depression I was in. Even Tank was looking uncharacteristically melancholy. Without any warning at all tears sprang to my eyes and spilled down my cheeks.

I cracked open another forty and plugged it into my mouth trying to silence the sobs before they began. I nearly drowned myself as my sorrow took hold of me full force and shook me like a broken toy. Beer sprayed everywhere as I choked on my own grief. I hurled the bottle at the swings a few yards away and felt a little better somehow to hear it shatter.

"Hey, bro? Are you alright?"

"What tha fuck is we doin', Tank? What tha fuck is we doin'?" The tears were flowing freely and my chest heaved with sobs. I wanted to destroy whatever it was that was making me hurt so bad. My hands balled into tight fists and my forearms bulged. I wanted to find the pain and beat it down the way Huey had beaten down that White kid. But it was deep inside of me where I couldn't get to it.

"How tha fuck did we turn into monsters, Tank? We were kids! Just a bunch of fucking kids! How did we get this way? We're murderers, man! We're fucking monsters!"

Tank looked at me and for once that cynical look of amused disinterest had left his face. There was none of the boredom and apathy that had seemed to be carved into his features, a congenital characteristic as much a part of him as his blue-black skin. Now, incredibly, his face showed compassion and understanding. It was obvious that he would have rather not ever have had this conversation and was conceding to it only because he sensed I needed it. He sighed deeply and looked up at the darkening sky. Then he took another swig of malt liquor and one more hit off the blunt. When he spoke his voice was slow and measured, heavy with emotion.

"Remember how poor we were when we first started doing this? Remember how things changed for us after we met Scratch? Like, things got better from day one. I mean, right after we did Meech, remember how proud you were to go to school in all those new clothes and not be laughed at for once? We finally felt like we were regular kids and not just some dirty little poor kid from the ghetto? Remember that feeling, Snap? I felt like somebody for the first time when we walked into school and all the kids were jockin' our new gear. It was like my first shot of pussy it felt so good. Even the females were given me a little respect for once. Even our teachers looked at us differently. Don't even front like you don't remember how they used to look at us with disgust and pity. Most of the time they just ignored us completely like they just figured that stupidity and poverty went hand and hand. I wouldn't have dared raise my hand back then because I never wanted to

call attention to myself. But I didn't even sweat walkin' up to the blackboard to solve a problem when I was sportin' Jive and Cross Colors. I'd have never done that in a pair of raggedy ass hand-me-downs because if anyone had laughed at me I'd have had to kill them. Those clothes, that money, it changed our lives man. I would have killed anyone, even you, to keep that feeling. But now man, sometimes I'd give anything to be that poor dirty little fat kid again. You think you the only nigga with a conscience? Shit, I still think about what we did to Meech. You blew his ass away right at my feet."

I was in shock. It may sound stupid now...I mean human beings are human beings...but I would have never imagined that Tank worried about this kind of shit. He always seemed to be so unaffected by everything. *Tank was human*. My whole perception of reality changed with that one realization.

But if he was human how could he kill so casually?

The thought kept coming back to me as I sat there guzzling the last of my forty and wiping tears from my eyes. How could Tank spray a guy with that big ugly AK and then go get a cheesesteak hoagie and laugh and joke with the hoes up on the Ave.? How could he be so nonchalant about it? Then again, how often did I really sit and think about the fools I smoked? Tank said he still thought about Meech and I hadn't thought about him in years. He had been a stepping stone and I had stepped over his corpse and forgotten him.

What was wrong with me?

"Man, I know. I felt the same way. You think I wouldn't have sprayed this whole damn neighborhood for a new pair of Adidas? Shit, you ain't got to think because that's just what the fuck we've done. I got cops following me all the time, raiding my house, harassing my Mom and Grandmom. I got to watch my back all the time, scared some nigga's relative that I smoked might creep up on me and try to get revenge. Did you ever stop and think about how many bodies we got between us? We out there droppin' fools like flies and half of them don't even deserve to get bodied. I'm sayin', it's like Scratch be havin' us kill somebody every damn month like he's got a fuckin' quota to fill. I think he does it just to keep muthafuckas scared so they don't fuck with him. We're endin' muthafucka's lives just to build that White boy's rep."

Tank nodded in agreement.

"I know what you sayin', dog. Shit, half the time I think he just be havin' us body muthafuckas to keep us busy so we don't turn on him. He's one paranoid muthafucka and that shit worries me too. He might start thinkin' we out to get him too and get us done one day. But man, we don't need to be thinkin' about all this shit. We in this now 'til the end. We can talk this shit, but ain't neither of us goin' back. You tryin' to go back to bein' nuthin'? I don't think so. So why even sweat this shit? I be thinkin' about quittin' all the time, but we both done got too used to bein' paid. Ain't neither of us givin' this up. So let's stop trippin' on all this depressin' shit. It's blowin' my high."

"That's the problem, Tank. I can't forget. This shit is eatin' me up. I be thinkin' I see ghosts and shit at night like followin' me around and shit. And I ain't talkin' about when I'm asleep and dreamin' neither. I mean I'll be drivin' around in my car and I think I see people that we smoked up and walkin' around like they stalkin' my ass."

"Dog, you trippin'. That weed is fuckin' with your head, Snap. Maybe this shit is too strong for you. What you trippin' on all this shit for anyway? Was it what Huey said

earlier? Forget that nigga! He so damned conscious, but he a killer his damned self. He was out there bodyin' fools before any of us. Let somebody call him White boy or a half-breed and see if they don't get smoked. Shit, he killed your fuckin' Dad! I ain't sayin that muthafucka didn't deserve it. I'm just sayin' that Huey ain't got no room to be comin' down on us about shit."

"Yeah, it's Huey, but it's something else too."

"What is it, man?"

"I know what our next job is."

"What?"

"You know. I know you knew it was comin' too. The whole neighborhood knows it's comin'."

"You mean Warlock?" Tank asked.

"Yeah man, everybody knows that he's the one that cut up those dealers up on Duval Street. He gave them fools ear to ear grins. Fuckin' stupid too. He might as well have autographed his work. Everybody knows he's the only fool still runnin' around with a blade instead of a gun. Everybody else got gats except for crackheads and hoes. And as clean as that cut was it wasn't just some crazy crackheads or nothin'. That shit was professional."

"Fuck would he do that shit for though?"

"I don't know man. That fool ain't been right for years. He's probably trippin' 'cause his little brotha Nikky just had a heart attack from hittin' the pipe and he probably figured those was the fools who sold it to him. Shit, Nikky got the shit from watchin' him smoke. But niggas can't take responsibility for they own fuck ups. They always got to blame somebody else."

"Damn, Snap. Didn't you and Nikky used to play together when ya'll was little?"

"Yeah, and Warlock too. He was like a big brother to me. He's the reason I wanted to get in the game to begin with. He wasn't all fucked up then like he is now. He used to be clean as fuck, a straight hustler. You remember how he used to cruise around in that big ass Lincoln dressed like a pimp and shit? He showed everybody 'round here what it meant to be a playa. I got all my game from him. He used to shoot dice, steal cars, he even sold dope. His main thing was pimpin' hoes though and he had some fine ones too. I never knew where he got them from, but he had white ones, black ones. He even had a couple Puerto Ricans once. Then his dumb ass started usin' and he fell the fuck off like all the rest of them junkies. He kicked heroin and went straight to crack and fell in love. He ain't been right since."

"That's fucked up, playa. You really gonna do him?"

"The trigga has no heart my brotha. I ain't gonna do him, but this nine millimeter damn sure will."

"That's pretty cold, man."

"I didn't make this world, Tank. I just have to live in it. If I had a choice shit wouldn't be like this. But it is what it is. Warlock is crazy anyway. He might come up and slit my throat next or yours. Who knows what he's trippin' on now. We're just as responsible for bringing drugs into the hood as those two dealers. We're Scratch's enforcers and he knows that shit."

"Yeah, whatever. That shit is still cold."

“Alright, so you’ve got a fuckin’ conscience now. Well, keep that shit to your damned self. Since when did you start givin’ a fuck anyway?”

Tank just smirked, raised one eyebrow, and tilted up the last forty, draining it dry.

“I don’t give a fuck if you don’t. You goin’ to that game tonight?”

“What game?”

“The basketball game at the college?”

“Jerome and Ty playing?”

“Why tha fuck else would I be askin’? Me and Huey gonna hook up and go.”

“Ya’ll need a ride or something?”

“Naw, we straight. I was just seein’ if you gonna be there to support ya dogs?”

“Of course I’m gonna support ’em. They my dogs. I’m gonna be there.”

The twins were having their first basketball game at the college level. After years of taking fools to school on playground courts and high school gymnasiums they had both received athletic scholarships to Temple University. Tyrone had even been offered a scholarship to run track. He could sprint like a gazelle, but hoops were his passion. He could leap from the foul line like Dr. J and execute a perfect two handed slam-dunk while twisting in mid-air. They called him Jr. Jordan and he tried his best to live up to the hype. He still played the neighborhood courts on the weekends just to keep his skills sharp, even after practicing all week long at college. Basketball was his guarantee that he’d never have to do the things we were doing for cash. Seeing us fighting and struggling, slangin’ and bangin’, was enough to instill him with a fanatical drive to escape the legacy of his roots.

His brother Jerome wasn’t quite as dramatic. He came back to the neighborhood to hang out, smoke weed, drink forties, and get his nut off in the gaggle of willing hoodrat skeezers that flocked to him because of his amateur stardom. He hated college. The politics of his fellow classmates seemed naïve and ridiculous to him. They were all concerned with feminism, animal rights, gay rights, pacifism, conservation, wildlife preservation, recycling, and he could have given a fuck about all that. All Jerome was interested in was making dollars. He believed in the golden rule. Who ever has the most gold makes the rules. In his mind if you wanted to change the world you had to start by acquiring wealth. Only the wealthy truly had the power to affect change in today’s world. All us poor mutherfuckers could do is beg them for their help. He wasn’t into begging. He was into taking.

“Ya’ll mutherfuckers are wastin’ your time with all this activism shit. Don’t you know might makes right? Don’t no rights exist without the ability to defend them. How you goin’ to say you have the right to walk down the street without getting’ mugged when fools are rollin’ your ass for your ends every time you leave the house? Sayin’ you have the right don’t mean shit. Those are just words. They don’t mean shit until you bust a cap in the next fool who runs up on you tryin’ to take yours. That’s how rights are established. What would our constitutional rights be without a military and police force that defended them? Get some power, some fuckin’ cash, and then you can change all the shit you want.”

This viewpoint did not endear him with the intellectual establishment. Overnight he was branded a fascist. He didn’t care. He despised the idealism of the sheltered eggheads who attended this school, who had never experienced a real challenge to their

personal rights. He wished he could just play basketball and be left alone.

Jerome's problems weren't over when he reached the ball courts either. Being a twin meant constant comparisons to his brother and his style of play was completely different. He wasn't a flashy showman like Ty. His forte was hitting jumpers and three-pointers. He couldn't run the ball down court to save his life. He didn't have any fancy fakes and dribbles. His ball handling skills were woeful and his defensive skills were non-existent. He was always getting the ball picked from him. He covered it up by refusing to dribble the ball and just shooting it from wherever he was at on the court. Seven out of ten times he'd send that rock sailing through the net, which was just often enough to get him full tuition.

The twins were both college freshman now while the rest of us were still in high school and some of us had already dropped out. This made them sort of local heroes. I didn't know shit about college ball. I didn't even watch the pros unless the Sixers were playin', but this game was gonna be a reunion of sorts. Brothas I hadn't hung out with since Jr. High were going to be there. I didn't even know who Temple was playing.

When we showed up there were already about a dozen niggas from around the way hangin' out in front of the building. Every one of them was clutching a bottle of Colt .45 with a blunt tucked behind their ears. They were arguing with security. Fat Greg was there and I could see the outline of an Uzi beneath his oversized sweatshirt. As I looked around I could see other suspicious bulges beneath the rest of their clothing. A bunch of guys I didn't know had joined the argument and it looked only seconds away from becoming a full-scale riot.

"Fuck is goin' on?" I yelled and everyone turned to look at me. Those fools who didn't know me turned back around and kept arguing with the security guards who had now been joined by reinforcements. My homies stopped and waited for me to walk over.

"Yo, Snap! These fools won't let us up in here—wantin' to frisk us and shit—they took Drew's beer and poured it out on the ground!"

Everyone was looking at me now. They may not have known my face, but they all knew my name and my rep. I looked over at Drew and he had his hand under his jacket like he was reaching for a weapon. His face was swollen with indignation. I doubted that he was strapped though.

"If you ain't about to pull a gun from under there then you better take your hand out. That's how fools get killed."

Drew smirked and flashed me the little silver .22 tucked in his waistband. I turned to look at the guards who had managed to calm down the other troublemakers and were starting to move the line into the gym. I turned back to the mob barely suppressing my anger.

"Get the fuck over here and put that shit away. All you fools get over here! This is Tyrone and Jerome's big day and you niggas is about to fuck it up by startin' a riot in this bitch? Now, I'm gonna tell ya'll muthafuckas what's gonna happen and I don't want no shit or I swear to God I'll fly a muthafucka's head right here and now. Ya'll take them guns and whatever the fuck else ya'll got and put them back in your cars. Let them guards do they fuckin' jobs and act like ya'll got some sense once you get up in there. Just can't stand to see brothas makin' something of they selves can ya'll? Always gotta fuck shit up for everybody."

They all stood back, looking at me like I was crazy as I snarled at them in disgust.

“Nigga, I ain’t putting my gat nowhere. Fuck you and them twins!”

I was just about to pull out my own gat when someone stepped in front of me and punched Drew in the gut, doubling him over. He slumped to the ground with his eyes full of tears as his wind exploded from his lungs. When Tank pulled his fist out of Drew’s stomach he was clutching the little .22 in his hand.

“If you ain’t got no respect for nobody then your bitch ass shouldn’t be here. Now, you’ll get this back when the shit is over and if you got anymore problems we can discuss it then. We got any problems?”

“Nuh-naw, Tank. We cool,” Drew wheezed as he struggled back up to his feet, still wincing in pain.

“How about the rest of ya’ll?”

Both Tank and Huey were now standing shoulder to shoulder with me glaring out over what seemed to be half the brothas and sistas in the neighborhood.

“It’s all good, Bro.”

“Yeah, it ain’t nothin’ but a thang.”

“You know we cool, Snap.”

They started walking off toward their cars draining their forties and getting last hits off their blunts. Huey and Tank walked with me to my car.

“That nigga Drew is gettin’ out of control. He’s startin’ to believe his own bullshit. If ya’ll hadn’t shown up I was about to split his wig.”

Huey turned his flat dead eyes toward me and smiled. As I watched, the smile turned to a scowl and then both expressions faded entirely leaving a lifeless mask.

“Yeah, I bet you would have.”

The twins lit up the court. Tyrone scored twenty-four points with ten rebounds and six assists. Jerome scored eighteen points. No rebounds. No assists. Temple still lost though with scores of one eighteen to one eleven to the Georgetown Hoyas. Darlene and Tina were there and I thought Tank was gonna faint when Darlene asked him out on a date.

“I know you like me, nigga. So why come you never asked me out?”

“Uh-um.”

“Fuck that! You takin’ me out this weekend.”

She smiled sweetly, winking coyly, one hand on her luscious hips, the other reaching out to carress Tank’s nervously twitching cheek.

“And make sure you take me someplace nice. I don’t play that Mickey D shit.”

She walked off switching her perfectly sculpted, perfectly round, exquisitely muscled ass. My dick got hard and I don’t even like the bitch. Tank was probably bustin a nut in his pants. Right after she left, Scratch showed up.

“That was some game, huh? Them niggas sure can ball.”

“Watch your fuckin’ mouth, white boy! I should bust your fuckin’ grille for that shit!” Huey growled, pushing his face up into Scratch’s pasty mug. Tank dragged Huey away from Scratch before they could lock horns.

“Look, Snap, I just stopped by to tell you I need that business taken care of tonight, alright?”

“Then it’s done. Now get the fuck out of here before Huey caps your ass.”

I was tempted to ask Tank to let me do this job on my own. That would have been the sentimental thing to do, but Warlock was a crafty muthafucka with that blade and I had seen brothas get gutted with shanks in juvie. The idea of having my belly ripped open by a six-inch stiletto and seeing my steaming innards come boiling out of my stomach or of having my throat cut and drowning in my own blood, chilled me deeper than the idea of catching a bullet or just about any other way of dying. I took Tank along just in case. If that sneaky little nigga got the jump on me I would want Tank backing me up with the AK. Warlock was no ordinary crackhead and I was feeling more than a little guilt over the idea of killing him, not to mention my guilt over the death of his brother who had once been a close friend.

Just like any other teenagers we thought we were invincible. That doesn't mean we didn't take all the proper precautions. It just meant that we thought we could out fight, out shoot, or out smart, anyone we came across. It never occurred to us that there may be some situations we couldn't handle. The only way we thought we could die is if we fucked up and got caught slippin'. It never occurred to us that we could plan and execute everything perfectly and still get killed. It never occurred to us that people died in this game no matter how strong or cunning they were. That bullets really don't have any one's name on them. No matter how many innocent children we saw gunned down in drivebys, no matter how many times we saw our homeboys torn apart as we stood mere inches away by bullets meant for us, no matter how many funerals or public service announcements we saw, it never occurred to us that we could be next. Not because we were careless, but just because we were in the game, and that's as careless as you need to be to get your ass taken out.

I was nervous as a muthafucka when we rolled down G-town Ave, looking for Warlock. Tank sat in my big old Impala with a turkey and cheese hoagie between his legs right next to the AK. If a cop had drove by he would have seen that big ass assault rifle immediately, but of course Tank was giving less than a fuck. If cops had rolled on us Tank would have held court in the street and I would have thrown down right beside him. Some cop might have been given a parade for being shot in the line of duty, but the two of us would certainly have wound up as just two more sorry-ass dead niggas bleeding on the sidewalk. I threw my jacket over the AK, which drew a slight chuckle from Tank. I was sure that his lackadaisical attitude would bury us both some day.

“Yo, there's that muthafucka now!”

Tank grabbed the AK and swung the barrel out the window. I grabbed the rifle and pulled it back inside. Warlock, who was just passing a local bar called the Starlight Lounge, caught the motion and bolted down the street.

“Man, fuck did you grab me like that for? We could have had that nigga!”

“Yeah, and started a big muthafuckin' drug war in the process! You can't just go sprayin' up the Ave like that. We ain't the only killers in the world you know.”

Those two blocks of Germantown Avenue between Washington Lane and Walnut Lane were where all the players hung out, both young and old. You could buy anything here: weed, heroin, crack, powder, guns, pussy, anything. The most dangerous thugs in the G kicked it on this stretch of avenue and it was no place to go unloading an assault rifle.

I floored the Impala's big four hundred and fifty two horsepower V8 engine and

sped off after Warlock while Tank's eyes scanned the vast array of hardened gangstas he'd almost unloaded into. Buttaman, the tall inky black skeleton who singlehandedly controlled all the horse on the West side of G-town, glared murderously at our car as we drove past. His hand was shoved deep into the pocket of his trench coat and probably gripped around the handle of the big forty-four Colt revolver everyone knew he carried there. His soulless eyes looked through us without seeing two of the hardest niggas in the game as we thought of ourselves, but a couple of dumb-ass trigger-happy amateurs who probably wouldn't live to see half of his forty years. He slid his hand out of his coat, sneered, and waved us off. I felt like I had just passed through a ghost. Even Tank let out a long staggering breath. Buttaman was a dead aim with that forty-four. If he had decided to pull it out we would both be dead. There was not even a question about it. We were alive because he didn't feel we were worth wasting the bullets. He was from a different time when people didn't kill each other over shit like that, or at least that's what they told us. For a split second, looking into Buttaman's eyes, I felt the fear my own victims must feel when they see me coming. It was a feeling I hoped I'd never have again.

"He went around the corner!"

I spun the Impala into a sharp turn and lit up Tulpehocken Street with my fog lights. Warlock ducked into the playground in back of the pre-school in the middle of the block. We knew he was going to jump that fence and keep going into the junkyard next door where there would be plenty of shadows and shit to hide behind for an ambush. A shiver crawled up my spine, raked its icy claws over my shoulder, and wrapped its fingers around my neck to strangle the breath from me at the thought of following him into that death trap. Tank had already grabbed the AK and had the door half open as I pulled to a stop in front of the big mango-colored pre-school.

"Come on! Lets get this muthafucka!" Tank said and was out of the car without a hesitation.

Warlock ain't shit but another crackhead, I told myself, but the thought of that blade sliding between my ribs brought fresh shivers up my spine.

I looked around the playground, but I knew that Warlock wasn't there. He had already gone into the junkyard next door and was probably waiting to ambush our asses.

"Yo, Tank! Don't get too far ahead of me, man!"

"Just hurry and catch up before we lose this slippery son of a bitch!"

Tank's voice came from no more than five yards ahead of me, but it was so dark in that junkyard that he was completely invisible. I jumped the fence into the junkyard. My feet came down on what was probably a paint bucket and I went sprawling face first into the dirt.

"Shit! Where you at, Tank?"

"Right here." His voice echoed off the piles of trash and seemed to come from everywhere at once.

"Where, man? I can't see shit in this muthafucka!" I was starting to panic. This wasn't a cool situation at all. Alone in the dark with a knife-wielding homicidal crack-fiend.

"Fuck looking for me. Go find that crazy son of a bitch!"

I could hear Tank's heavy footfalls moving quickly, increasing the distance between us.

“Wait! Let’s stick together on this. We don’t know where this muthafucka could be.”

“Stop worryin’ and handle your business, Snap!”

I cursed to myself as I heard Tank moving further off into the night. It would’ve made me feel a hell of a lot better to have Tank beside me with the AK. Normally that’s how we played it, but that night it was like Tank had something to prove. Maybe getting Darlene’s phone number had gone to his head and boosted up his testosterone? Whatever his problem was, that type of ego shit was dangerous.

Slowly my eyes started to adjust to the darkness. The rusted hulks of ancient pimp-rides loomed in front of me stripped of all their splendor. Somewhere among that graveyard of crumbling Detroit steel was the man I had to kill, undoubtedly just as intent on killing me. Off to my left I heard scuffling, the sounds of a struggle, and then the unmistakable thud of a body hitting the dirt. I’d heard it too many times not to recognize it. I looked through the windshield of an old Buick and saw Warlock’s afro silhouetted by the moonlight as if the clouds had parted just to illuminate that scene and give me a clear shot. As always, I fired reflexively, without taking time to aim, and as always I hit my target. I ran around to the front of the car where Warlock’s body had fallen. I practically tripped over him.

Warlock was doing St. Vitus’ dance, flopping on his back like a cockroach in a cloud of Raid, with a fist-sized hole in his chest. Beside him, lay Tank with his eyes fixed and dilated, staring skyward. His mouth hung open in an agonized scream that never made it past his lips. He had been nearly decapitated. Pink muscle fiber stretched like used bubblegum across the chasm between where Tank’s head had been joined to his neck. Pearlescent bone shined ghastly white through the slash in his flesh where the knife had sawed through to his cervical vertebrae. The foot-long switchblade, still clutched in Warlock’s hand, dripped with inky black blood that glistened in the moonlight. My stomach imploded, collapsing inward until it touched the back of my spine, sending out an avalanche of half-digested food. Tank was gone, dead, because of me. Warlock had been in the process of butchering him just before I shot the crazy bastard. Somehow Warlock had surprised Tank and took him out before he could fire a single shot.

I began kicking Warlock’s dying body, trying to crush every bone in him, to pulverize him the way I’d watched Huey do that peckerwood kid. He shuddered one last time and lay still, yet I continued to stomp and kick his corpse. The sound of his bones snapping was a soothing noise to drown out the whirlwind in my head. The tears came without relent as the reality of Tank’s death took hold. My foot sank into the hole in Warlock’s chest and came out sopping with blood with bits of his internal organs stuck to my sole. I slammed my foot back down into it and began jumping up and down imagining that I was stomping on the bastard’s heart.

It was the sirens that snapped me out of it. I ran across the yard and jumped the fence into a neighboring backyard and then from one yard to the next until I wound up in an alleyway that led out onto Washington Lane. I was only a few blocks from home, but didn’t want to face my mother dripping in blood. My first instinct was to go to Huey’s house, but I was afraid he’d take his brother’s death out on me. I knew Huey believed that Tank was only involved with Scratch because I was. And even though I knew that Tank would have still been down even if I wasn’t, he probably wouldn’t have been out running

around a junkyard chasing a lunatic if I hadn't asked him to come with me. I wasn't in the mood to confront either Huey's rage or my own guilt. I decided to go back to Yolanda's house.

The police were probably celebrating Tank's death at this very moment and since they knew he and I were a team, they would be coming after me next, hoping to take me down for Warlock's murder and get all three of us out of the game in one evening. I knew they'd be kicking down my Grandmom's door any minute now looking for me. Hopefully they wouldn't think to look for me at Yolanda's.

There were sirens everywhere. The police were combing the streets. I knew I had to get inside somewhere before they picked me up. Yolanda's house was only two blocks away, but it seemed like miles. I couldn't get to it by running through alleys and hopping fences. I would have to cross Washington Lane, one of the busiest streets in our neighborhood and one that was now filthy with law enforcement. I watched patrol cars speed back and forth as I hugged the shadow of a large Evergreen tree in a yard that bordered Washington Lane and McCallum Street. As soon as the police sirens began to trail off I made a dash across the street and kept running until I was at Yolanda's front door.

She had a man in there with her. I could tell by the way she answered the door—wrapped in a sheet. The disheveled look of her hair and make-up, even her smell, was that of someone who'd just been fucked.

"Hey, baby. I didn't think you'd be back tonight. It's not really a good time right now." She glanced over her shoulder into the house and then turned back to me and smiled shamelessly. I ain't never been the jealous type, but right then I wasn't in the mood to wait outside while some other stud got his dick wet in my pussy. I tried to push the door open and walk past her. She held the door closed as I shoved against it.

"Bitch, who you fuckin' in there? Open this mutherfuckin' door 'fore I kick it off the hinges and smoke both ya'll asses!"

"Nigga, don't come around here tossin' threats cause you know I ain't impressed and you know damn well you don't own this pussy!"

"Bitch, I don't give a fuck about your old, used up, dug out pu...pus...pussy."

My voice seized up and tears flooded my eyes.

"Tank's dead." I finally managed to squeak out.

Yolanda's eyes widened with shock. Her hand flew to her mouth and she cast another quick look behind her into the house. There was sorrow and surprise in her face, but there was something else. Fear.

"What did you say, boy?" she whispered.

"I said, Tank was just killed."

"Oh my God!"

When she opened the door it was Huey standing behind her with murder in his eyes. He had obviously just finished fucking Yolanda and hadn't even bothered to put his clothes or underwear back on. He stood in the doorway butt-naked. The whole scene would have been hysterical if it wasn't for the hatred twisting his features, directed at me. He grabbed me by the front of my shirt and flipped me over his shoulder. I tumbled into the hallway, landing hard on the tiled floor.

"It wasn't my fault, Huey! It wasn't my fault!"

Huey pulled his Sig Sauer out of his jacket pocket as he passed the coat rack. He jacked a round into the chamber, walking toward me in long determined strides like some unstoppable naked juggernaut. Yolanda had started screaming and was trying to hold him back.

“Huey, listen. It was Warlock who did him. We were tracking him through the junkyard and he must have snuck up on him. I got him though. I took that nigga out for Tank. He was like a brother to me. You know I’d have died for that nigga. I’d have died for him!”

“Here’s your chance,” Huey said, raising the gun until it was pointed directly at my skull.

Tears were streaming down my face in torrents. It hadn’t even occurred to me to go for my own weapon. If Huey was going to kill me then I was going to die and that was all there was to it. I stared into Huey’s eyes and I could see my own death in them. I saw his finger tighten on the trigger and I closed my eyes and waited, wondering if I would hear the gunshot before oblivion. Then Huey’s shoulders slumped and he uncocked the pistol. Tears were streaming down his face now, but his eyes didn’t soften or stray from my own. He didn’t look weak or vulnerable at all when he cried. He looked focused, determined, and pissed-da-fuck-off.

“Yeah, you right. It wasn’t your fault. You just as lost as he was, and it wasn’t Warlock’s fault either. It was that white devil you work for. It was his fault and he’s gonna pay for this shit. I owe him some pain now.”

That night I sent Yolanda to bury my gun in the woods in Wissahickon Park so the cops wouldn’t be able to pin Warlock’s murder on me. Huey stayed with me at Yolanda’s, but didn’t say a word. I jumped in the shower to wash off the gun powder residue while my clothes went into the washer. I was in the shower for maybe five-minutes when the police broke down the door and dragged me out. By the time they dragged my Black ass, soaking wet, kicking, and screaming, out of the shower they already had Huey in handcuffs. They allowed me to get dressed and I made sure to put on a pair of old clothes I had left there previously just in case they got smart and decided to test the clothes for gunpowder or blood splatter. Those fools would have nothing on me.

They placed Huey and I in separate cars so they could work on us individually and try to make us turn on each other. I played deaf mute and just stared out the window.

“You know Huey’s gonna give you up, don’t you? You got his brother killed. He told me he wants to see you rot in prison for that. He hopes you wind up on death row. He’s in the next car giving a full statement right now.”

I continued to stare out the window as we rolled through the neighborhood. The cop’s voices were just white noise in the background. When the old burly black cop reached over and punched me in the head I slumped down in my seat to avoid further blows and continued to stare out the window, secretly wondering if this was the same house-nigger that held Huey’s mom down eighteen years ago while that white cop raped her.

They put both of us in a cell together down at the fourteenth precinct. It was a big concrete room with one glass wall two-inches thick that faced out into the squad room. Outside the temperature was sixty degrees. Inside that room the temperature was ninety and rising. Police officers walked by and glared at us trying to make us nervous. We

laughed at them, grabbed our dicks, and waved our middle fingers. I started singing “Fuck Da Police” by NWA at the top of my lungs and Huey joined me. An inmate in the cell next door began pounding a beat on the concrete wall that divided us. Other inmates joined in on the chorus and soon we had a full scale party going on. The officers started cursing and threatening us, pounding their fists on the desks like they wanted to come in there and start some shit. So we changed the tune to Ice T’s “Cop Killer.” That seemed to agitate them enough to make them come in and talk to us. Huey was livid over being arrested. If the cops weren’t wearing guns I think he would have tried to take them on.

“You guys settle down and cut out all that noise.”

“Fuck you got us locked up for? We ain’t been fingerprinted. Nobody read us our rights. We haven’t been allowed to make a phone call. My brother gets murdered and you muthafuckas are harassing us? Fuck you bitches!”

“Just calm down a minute. We just want to ask you guys some questions.”

The cop looked like a younger, fatter, uglier Rodney Dangerfield. He had livid red and purple liver spots all over his face, a big hooked nose with a wart on it, and big bubbly eyes that appeared blood-shot from lack of sleep and too much alcohol. His partner looked like a runway model. His hair was spiked with mousse and his eyelashes looked like he’d brushed them with mascara. He was obviously gay.

“Is we under arrest?”

“They call you Snap, right?”

“My name’s Malik.”

“Yeah, well Malik, you just might be under arrest if we find out you had anything to do with that shit over by the wrecking yard. And you, Mr. Huey P. Newton, your ass ain’t exactly clean either.”

“Whatever, man. Are we done here or what?”

“Where were you tonight, Snap?”

“My name’s Malik and I was right where you found me.”

“All night?”

“Yeah, all night.”

“And what about you, pretty boy? Where were you?” the cop asked. He started to reach up to grab Huey’s face, but something in Huey’s eyes made the man think better of it. I knew that it was already taking a Herculean act of will for Huey to resist going for the guy’s throat. If the cop had touched him Huey would have almost definitely exploded.

“I was with him. All night.”

“Now what was both of you doin’ with one girl all night?”

“Watching Dave Chappelle,” Huey hissed.

“And fuckin’.” I looked over at Huey accusingly. He sneered at me and hissed through his teeth.

What right did I have to be jealous of him fucking some slut when I had gotten his brother killed?

“Yeah,” Huey growled as his eyes bore into my skull. He turned his head to stare back at the officer, “And fuckin’.”

The two officers started laughing.

“Both of you fucking one woman? What? There ain’t enough crackwhores in Germantown for the both of you?”

“Oh, you should have seen her, Sarge. She wasn’t no crackwhore. She was thick as hell! Titties big as my head and an ass like a beachball. Looked like she could have taken both these boys all night and still had enough left over for you and me.”

“You little dick mutherfuckers wouldn’t even touch the sides. It would be like trying to stir a bowl of chilli with a toothpick,” Huey said, taunting them. I couldn’t help but to laugh as the officer’s eyes widened in surprise and then narrowed in anger. They wanted to kick both of our asses and probably would have if we’d been somewhere more private and not in the noisy holding cell.

They separated us and then questioned us again. Hours later, they put us back in the cells and let us sleep for about half an hour before waking us both up and dragging us back into the interrogation room for another round of twenty questions. It went on like this all night. We weren’t allowed to call our lawyers and they never once read us our rights or told us we were under arrest. In the morning they let us go. Yolanda came to pick us up.

“Damn, Kurt! You were right! She probably could take all of us!” the sergeant said loud enough for Huey and I both to hear as he watched Yolanda walk through the station. His eyes roved over her ass and breasts like a fat kid appraising a box of donuts.

I could tell by the veins pulsating in Yolanda’s forehead that she was furious. As soon as we left the precinct she let us both have it.

“Why’d ya’ll have to say ya’ll was both fuckin’ me?”

“Cause we knew they’d believe that. Did you see the way those devils were looking at your ass? I bet they’ll be jacking off thinkin’ about it tonight.”

“You should have heard the way they were questioning me when they came to confirm your alibis. They were all making jokes and shit and I couldn’t do nothing about it. I was so mad at you two muthafuckas that I was tempted to say I hadn’t seen either one of you last night.”

“Yeah, well at least nobody strip searched you and looked up your ass with a flashlight, though you might have liked that shit.”

“I know they would have loved to do it.”

“Fuck both of you bastards!”

I laughed and then turned to Huey.

“Uh, man, is we still cool? You know your brother was like family to me. I mean, I just never expected it to go down like this.”

“Fuck did you think? Ya’ll was bulletproof or something? Shit, ya’ll should have known that sooner or later this shit was gonna happen. Going after Warlock in some dark ass junkyard? Stupid mutherfuckers! You lucky that you ain’t dead too. But I can’t blame you for none of this. Tank knew what he was doin’.”

“Shit, man! I can’t believe he’s gone. Damn. Damn. Damn!”

I wept quietly as we drove back home in Yolanda’s little Civic hatchback. My face was a blank mask. The car was so small that the dashboard pushed my knees almost to my chest and I hugged them as the tears trickled down my face. The weight of the previous night came crashing down on me with paralyzing force. I was stunned into mute shock. In the back, Huey stared straight ahead, a psychotic fury burning in his eyes and vibrating through his tightly contracted tendons and muscles. A single tear traveled the course of worry lines in his face and splashed down in his lap upon his clenched fists.

“That’s it for me, man. I’m done with all this gangsta shit. Scratch can kiss my ass.”

Huey glared at me unconvinced. He’d heard it before.

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Chapter 15

“...The most hellish aspect of America’s racism is that for generations it has warped and twisted innately good black men, causing the vital vine of black family stability and strength to be poisoned, hacked down by the pity, fear and hatred of black children.”

—Iceberg Slim, “The Naked Soul of Iceberg Slim”

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The funeral was the following day. The funeral home’s entire parking lot was filled and cars lined the street for two blocks in every direction. The whole neighborhood had turned out to honor our fallen brother. Homies we hadn’t seen in years filed in looking stunned and devastated. There was more leather, fur, and snakeskin in that place than at a Tyson fight. It was like a who’s who of the gangsta elite. Old players from my mom’s and even my grandmom’s generation showed up to pay their respects. They laid lavish wreaths around the casket and some even handed Mrs. Turner little envelopes filled with money. I didn’t know whether that was cool or not. It was the first friend I had lost in the struggle and I wasn’t sure what was appropriate.

Was there even a such thing as thug funeral etiquette?

Young gangstas from West Philly to Mount Airy strolled in half high and drunk, but all looking genuinely sad and remorseful. One of hardest playas in the game was gone. One of their own had passed before his time. Everyone was shocked.

Whenever anyone came over to try to comfort me I turned away from them. I wasn’t deserving of their sympathy. It was my fault he was dead. Darlene and Tina were both there and Darlene was bawling her eyes out hysterically. She had loved him after all. Both my Mom and Mrs. Turner glared at me as if I had stabbed him myself. I felt like shit.

The funeral quickly turned into a side show as people came up and began laying “tokens of esteem” in Tank’s casket, everything from platinum jewelry to money to handguns. It was like they were all trying to out do each other with who could come up with the most lavish gift for the dead. I was almost expecting someone to come up and try to lay a set of rims in there.

Women from the local church arrived and began grieving loudly and hysterically. None of the Turners had ever attended the church and they didn’t know any of the women. They wore gaudy dresses in loud primary colors and huge hats with plumes in them. Their outfits would have given any pimp or player in the room a run for his money. They walked up to Huey and Mrs. Turner sounding rehearsed and artificial as they offered their condolences.

“I’m so sorry for your loss. He was so young. But he’s in a much better place now. All his suffering is over. Now he’s in the arms of the Lord. If you ever need someone to pray with you sister, here’s our phone numbers.”

I got the impression that they attended every funeral in the neighborhood as some kind of bizarre church duty.

Tank was laid out in a black tuxedo with a red cummerbund and bow tie looking entirely unlike he ever had in life. I thought they would have buried him as we all remembered him, with his baggy black Ben Davis pants, his red and white Ecko Red shirt, and his black leather South Pole jacket with that big ugly AK laid across his chest. At least then he would have looked more like he did in life. They even untied his cornrolls and had his hair slicked back and tied in a ponytail. They obviously had some faggot back their dressing up the corpses who thought he was a fucking fashion designer or something. I couldn’t understand how Mrs. Turner could have let them desecrate his corpse like that.

His white shirt was pulled all the way up to his chin to hide the stitches where the mortician had sewn his head back on. The absence of blood in his veins from when they exsanguinated him and filled him with embalming fluid, made his skin look gray and ashen, not the rich gun-metal black it had been in life. Someone, probably the same queen that dressed him, had rubbed moisturizer on his face to try to counteract the effects, which made his skin glisten as if he was sweating. Flowers were everywhere, encircling the body, making Tank look like the centerpiece in one huge floral arrangement. It all looked fake and gaudy to me.

One by one, people strolled up to the casket. I could hear them making ridiculous comments about how natural he looked laying there.

“He almost looks like he’s still alive.”

I never understood why people said shit like that at funerals. What fucking consolation is that?

He’s not alive. He never looked like that when he was on the streets! When did you ever see this mutherfucker wearing a cummerbund with his fucking hair all slicked back like an Italian mobster? I hated that shit.

There was a man nervously pacing back and forth wearing a tight tuxedo that looked worn in the knees and elbows. He had a purple cummerbund and bow tie that fucking glittered for Christ’s sake! His hair was done up in a greasy Jeri curl like I hadn’t seen since the eighties and he was sweating curl activator all down the side of his face.

He shuffled through some papers that I realized with a wave of disgust were pages of sheet music. Here we were at a funeral and he was treating it like Showtime at the Apollo. I hadn’t noticed it until he began to sing, but the podium where the minister had stood and where this little man now stepped up to sing was in front of the casket. It was off to the side so that you didn’t have to walk around it to get to the casket or anything, but it was still in front. It made it look like the casket was just a prop, part of the background scenery.

The man cleared his throat and began to whale out a somber gospel tune that I, not surprisingly, did not know. He sang with his heart and soul like he was auditioning for *Star Search*, and even played to the audience as if he was expecting us to forget we were all at a funeral and give him a standing ovation. When his song was over he actually

looked disappointed that there were no applause. I had to leave.

When I stepped outside Huey was already standing in the parking lot leaning against my behemoth yellow '72 Impala.

"What took you so long? I thought you'd have been out of there the minute the church ladies showed up."

"You too, huh?"

"It looks like a fucking variety show in there. Let's get the fuck out of here."

"Where to?"

"Man, I don't know, Snap. Just fucking drive. Just get me the fuck away from this shit before I kill somebody." He sighed and tilted his head back to gaze up at the heavens.

"You want to go down to South Street? We ain't been down there since we was arrested that time."

"Yeah, it's been a few years hasn't it? Let's go down there and pick up some bitches. It would feel good to get my dick wet in some strange right about now."

"I thought things were still cool with you and Iesha?" I asked.

Huey looked at me with his eyebrow raised and his eyes narrowed as if he was trying to decide whether or not I was serious.

"Of course they are. But don't get it twisted. A man still has to be a man. You love one, but you fuck another. That's the only way you can deal with a woman's bullshit sometimes, knowing that you got someone else you can go to, to make you feel like a man again after she's done breakin' you down."

"Is that why you fucked Yolanda behind my back?"

"Why? Is she your woman? 'Cause to me it looks like she's everybody's woman."

"I know she gets around, but that ain't the point. You my dog. If you was hittin' it all you had to do was let me know so I wouldn't feel like I was gettin' played."

"Leave it, dog. She's a piece of ass. Just because you gettin' it more regular than most of the niggas she deals with don't mean it's yours. You need to find yourself a *real* woman. Fuck bangin' the neighborhood whore. You need to find someone to fall in love with."

"I did that once. It didn't work out."

"Fuck it. Let's just go."

We jumped in the car and headed straight for the expressway, blasting a new CD from The Roots as we passed a joint back and forth. We were high as hell by the time we pulled up at Fifth and South.

It was too early in the day for much to be going on down there. The high schools and colleges hadn't even let out for lunch yet so there was no pussy anywhere. The place was dead. We walked up and down the street looking into the punk rock stores, comic book stores, record shops, and clothing boutiques. We were just about to find a place to eat when I spotted a familiar silhouette on the next block. I sped up my stride without clueing Huey in on what I was after. I didn't want to hear his shit.

"Damn, Snap. Why you walkin' so fast? Slow down, bro."

Huey saw her sooner than I expected him to and he recognized her right away.

"Don't tell me you tryin' to catch up with that White bitch? Ain't that the same bitch you met down here that night the cops popped us like three years ago?"

"Shit, it's been damned near four years, but I still want some of that."

I strode up behind her and leaned in close enough so that she could feel my breath on the back of her neck. She sensed my presence before I could speak and whirled around ready to cuss me out. Her face was contorted into a look of outrage.

“Fuck is you doin’? Back tha fuck up off me!”

“Damn, you sound like you’ve dated a few brothas since the last time I saw you. You talk just like a nigga now. You still need a thug in your life?”

Her face relaxed as she recognized me and a smile spread across features.

“Don’t even talk to me,” She said, pretending to be upset, but obviously excited to see me again, “How come you ain’t call me?”

“I got arrested that night and I lost your number. I been hoping I’d run into you again.”

“Well, I still live down here. I’m up and down this street everyday. I wouldn’t have been hard to find if you’d really been lookin’.”

“I’ve been goin’ through some drama. I got locked up. Just got out.”

She didn’t even blink when I told her I’d been arrested. No questions, no complaints, nothing. She probably figured black folks got arrested every day. After all, we were all criminals weren’t we? It didn’t even occur to me that my lifestyle would have justified those stereotypes.

She turned to Huey and smiled flirtatiously. She could have saved all that. Huey ain’t into snowflakes.

“Who’s this?”

“This is my dog right here, Huey. Don’t expect him to be nice to you though. He don’t like White bitches and his brother just got killed so he ain’t in no mood to fake it. We’re supposed to be at a funeral right now.”

“Oh, I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Bitch, I don’t even know you. I don’t want your fuckin’ sympathy,” Huey snarled, freezing her warm condolences with his vicious blast.

“Let’s bounce, playa,” Huey started to walk off down the street. He stopped at the corner and leaned against a light pole waiting impatiently.

“Yeah, I’ll be with you in a minute alright? I told you he was a hateful muthafucka.”

“You ain’t lyin’. I know he’s had a tragedy and all, but all that wasn’t even necessary.” She looked genuinely shocked.

“I should be catching up to him though. He’s goin’ through some shit right now and I should be with him. Look, let me get that number again and I promise you we’ll hook up this time.”

“I shouldn’t be given your ass a second chance, but you just look so good.”

“Just write your number down on a matchbook or something ’cause I gotta bounce.”

I produced a pen and I couldn’t find a matchbook so she wrote her number on the back of a pack of rolling papers and handed it to me.

“You smoke weed?”

“I sell weed now that my Mom bounced on me. That’s how I’m payin’ the bills while I’m goin’ to college.”

I laughed to myself at the way she tried to incorporate my slang into her dialogue.

“Yeah, well why don’t you sell me a couple dimes so I can get my boy’s head straight?”

“I’ll give you some if you come by tonight.”

“Cool, I’ll be there.”

She slipped me a fat-ass sack of green bud. The kind of shit nobody can get in Philly. The smell alone was starting to get me high.

“Where the fuck did you get this from?”

“My sister lives in Northern California, in Marin County, and her fiancé grows the shit.”

“You a little hustler, huh? Yeah, we’re most definitely gonna hook up.”

I caught up to Huey and we walked around the corner, back to the Impala. We drove over to the State Store on Second Street. State Stores, as the name implies, are run by the State of Pennsylvania and are the only legal place where you can buy liquor in Philly.

We were both still under age so we had to bribe this old derelict into going in there for us. We bought a bottle of M.D. 20/20 and some Tangueray. Then we went to the corner store and bought some orange juice and a couple forties of Colt 45.

We snuck the orange juice and the Tangueray into a movie theatre on Chestnut Street and kicked back to watch Steven Seagal’s overweight ass do some weak Aikido moves while his gut protruded over his jeans and with arms as skinny as a woman’s wrist. We were so high that we were actually enjoying it though.

“Look at that fat mutherfucker. I’d whoop that bitch’s ass!” Huey whooped at the screen.

A fight broke out in the back of the theater and for once we didn’t get involved and make shit worse. We turned our backs on the movie screen to watch two gangs of kids just a few years younger than us threaten each other loudly without throwing a blow. It went on for almost twenty minutes before fists finally began to fly.

“Either start throwing or shut the fuck up so we can watch the damn movie!” an Old Gangsta yelled from the front while his girlfriend—who was decked in fur, platinum, and enough ice to chill a twelve pack—hugged his side.

Once it began it lasted less than a minute. The smaller group was chased out of the theater by the larger group and we all just went back to watching the movie.

An hour and a half passed before we staggered out of the theater and piled back into my Impala. We were torn down from the Tangueray and juice, but we were still not high enough to stop thinking about Tank. As soon as the movie ended the image of him lying in that casket came rushing back to us. We started talking to keep our minds off of it.

Huey seemed to be in a much better mood. We laughed and joked as we drove down the Parkway and onto Kelly Drive. The Schuylkill River was the same shit brown it had always been, yet in our intoxicated state, with the setting sun sparkling over the waters, it looked like the most tranquil and beautiful place on earth. We pulled into a parking area along the riverfront and cracked open the Mad Dog.

Huey and I sat there for hours talking about nothing. Anytime the memory of Tank’s murder tried to intrude its way back into my consciousness I would tell a joke or something. But it was unavoidable. Eventually the conversation lulled and we both

started thinking about Tank.

Tears streamed down our faces as we drained the bottle of MD and reminisced about our dead brother.

“Why don’t you roll up some of that Cali weed you got from that gray bitch? I ain’t fucked up enough yet,” Huey slurred.

I pulled out the baggy and the box of papers and rolled us the fattest joint I could manage. We lit up and passed it back and forth as we watched the sun crash into the horizon and explode across the sky in fiery reds and oranges.

“Tank would have loved this shit. You know how that nigga loved his weed.”

“Yeah, he stayed high. I don’t know how he could function as much weed as he smoked.”

“I remember one time we were doin’ a driveby on these JBGL muthafuckas and Tank had just lit up this fat ass joint. So we roll up along side these niggas and Tank pulls the AK out of his lap and while he’s swinging it out the window he knocks the joint out his mouth. You know that crazy muthafucka puts the AK down to pick up the joint? By the time he picked the rifle up again them fools had scattered. I laughed my ass off. Scratch was mad as hell that night and Tank just looked at him like ‘Hey, shit happens,’ and kept on smoking his blunt.”

Huey and I laughed hard at that even as the tears continued to fall. When we finally left the river I could hardly see straight I was so high.

“Damn, that was some good weed!”

“Hell yeah it was. Maybe I was wrong about that gray bitch. She might come in handy after all. Where you want to go now?”

“You ready to go back ’round the way?”

“Naw, ain’t shit to see there now. Besides, I don’t want to go watch my mom cry or deal with Iesha askin’ me a bunch of annoying ass questions trying to get me to express my feelings and shit. Don’t bitches realize that men ain’t like that? The last thing a man wants to do when he’s depressed is sit around and talk about why he’s depressed. You just want to forget about that shit. Get high. Get fucked. Whatever. You just want to forget. You know what I’m sayin’?”

“True indeed. Let’s just drive around for a while then.”

I hadn’t intended on driving back to the cemetery but somehow we both knew that was where we were going. We pulled through the gates of the Cheltenham Cemetery just as twilight darkened into night.

There were no lights in the cemetery. Huey and I staggered around in the dark for the better part of an hour trying to find Tank’s grave. Since we hadn’t attended the burial we didn’t even have the faintest clue which direction to look in and checking each headstone with no illumination except my disposable Bic lighter was tedious.

Huge gravestones, monuments, and crypts the size of small garages crammed every corner of the century old cemetery casting eerie shadows that recalled memories of old horror movies. We were so intoxicated that we were actually enjoying the search and the crawling superstitious dread that followed us as we stomped on earth beneath which the dead slumbered. We giggled as we tripped over gravestones and bumped into the large statues that marked many of the older graves.

“This is the older section. He ain’t buried over here. He should be over there

where all those little plaques are.”

We were in total darkness by the time we found Tank’s modest little headstone, which was little more than a plaque stuck in the ground as Huey had said. We collapsed upon it in exhaustion and cracked open our forties. I eulogized our brother in my own way as Huey stared on in silence.

“I remember how we all met. Remember how we almost killed each other and then wound up becoming best friends? Who’d have believed that shit? We terrorized that neighborhood so bad them niggas ain’t never gonna forget you. I won’t ever forget you, bro. You were my dog, my brother. Even if we didn’t share the same blood or come out of the same womb we shared the same spirit, the same soul. We been tighter than any two muthafuckas ever could be. We fought together. We laughed together. We got high together. We killed together. After all that time it was just in the last two or three days that I really got to know your big ass. I loved you man. You was one bad ass-kickin’ muthafucka and the game won’t be the same without you. I’m gonna miss you, bro.”

We poured our forties out on his grave.

“I wish there was some way we could have gotten him a cheesesteak hoagie to take on his journey. I know he’s hungry. That nigga’s always hungry.”

“I was just thinking about planting some weed on his grave. That would guarantee everybody from the hood would visit him.”

I stared at Tank’s modest little gravestone and something about it started to annoy me. They had put Tank’s real name on it, Anthony Turner, instead of the name by which he was known to all his friends and family. I took out a paint marker and wrote over the name in big silver letters; “*Tank*”.

“Rest in peace, my brother.”

We laid down on Tank’s grave, resting our heads on his stone. We rolled up some more of the weed and I took the seeds out and planted them in front of the headstone. We both inhaled deeply, choking and coughing, as we watched the clouds uncover the moon and the few stars that were visible through the city pollution wink on and off like Christmas lights. We were both wondering if Tank’s soul had made it into heaven.

“I hope Tank is up there kickin’ God’s ass right now.”

“Man, don’t say shit like that, Snap.”

“Why not?”

“Cause it ain’t cool to be talkin’ about God like that.”

“Don’t tell me you still into all that Muslim shit? I thought you gave that shit up when the Trade Center got smoked.”

“Man, don’t start dissin’ my faith. You could stand to have Allah in your heart.”

“No offence my brother, but Allah has done about as much for the Black man as any of these other gods, which is to say not a damn thing. You might as well be Catholic or Jewish for all the good any of that shit does.”

“Allah is the only way we can save the Black community. If Tank had been down with it he might still be here today.”

“Tank was down with the only God that ever helped anybody out ’round the way, the all-mighty dollar fuckin’ bill. But let’s not get into this. You don’t want to have this conversation with me now, Huey. You might get your feelings hurt. I just wish there really was a God up there. At least then I’d have somebody to blame for all this shit. It’d

fuck me up to think we brought all this shit on ourselves and that White folks were able to fuck our shit up for hundreds of years without any help from the Great White overseer in the sky.”

“See, that’s just what your problem is. You always lookin’ to blame somebody else rather than admit that you’re responsible for your own fucked up destiny. Now, I ain’t sayin’ them White devils ain’t conspired at every turn to keep the Black man on his knees. You know that don’t nobody hate crackers more than I do. I’m just sayin’ that brothers have sabotaged themselves so much that it ain’t been hard for them to do it. And if it wasn’t for Allah, the God of the Black man, who loves and protects us despite our ignorant self-destructive behavior, we would have never survived half the shit them devils have put our people through.”

“Naw, man. It don’t work that way. I mean I hear what you sayin’ and all, but it don’t work. See ’cause this Black God who’s supposed to love Black people, he created White People. And Yeah, I know you’re gonna say that Satan or Dr. Yaccub or some aliens from space created White folks, but see god created Satan and if there are aliens then God created them too. If God is truly all knowing then when he created Satan, *before* he created Satan, he knew the man would rebel against him and create White people and that they would oppress and enslave black people. So if God knew what Yaccub or Satan or whatever was gonna do, but he created these muthafuckas anyway, than he’s directly responsible for what happened to Black Folks as a result. And I ain’t even sayin’ I believe that all White people are devils. I’m just sayin’ that, based on your theories, that’s what you get. If they were all devils then there wouldn’t be any nice ones. They would all be evil, but there’s no more evil ones as far as I can see than there are evil niggas.”

“You just sayin’ that shit ’cause you bouts to try and fuck one of them devils. Muthafucka gets a little weed in him and wants to start getting’ all philosophical,” Huey laughs, “Okay, Socrates, what about personal responsibility? What about free will? Maybe nobody knew what damage these White devils would do until after they were created because of the unpredictability of free will. And Dr. Yaccub was a man too. Maybe God couldn’t predict what he would do either.”

“How unpredictable are most muthafuckas you know? Free will ain’t that fucking confusing that it should throw off even a muthafucka of average intelligence let alone a muthafucka that’s supposed to be all-knowing. I could drive through this city and tell you who a muthafucka is gonna vote for in the next election just by the size of their house, the car they drive, and the neighborhood they live in. People just ain’t that deep. If God is all-knowin’ then free will is an illusion anyway because he already knows everything you’re ever going to do, every decision you will ever make, before you ever make them, before he ever even created you. Because that’s what all-knowin’ is, knowin’ all! Not knowin’ most or knowin’ some, knowin’ all. So if he created you knowin’ everything you would do then you could say that he created you *to* do those things because he had the choice not to create you. See what I’m sayin’?”

“How you figure? You lost me, my brother.”

“Put it this way. Suppose you was takin’ the Pepsi Challenge. You remember that right? When there’d be this little guy at a booth and they’d have a glass of Pepsi and a glass of Coke and you were supposed to taste it and pick the one that you liked best?”

“Yeah, yeah, I remember that shit. So what?”

“Now if God knew before you ever sat down to take that test that you would choose Coke instead of Pepsi and he would know because he created your very nature and the environment that shaped your character plus he’s all-knowin’ and infallible, could you then choose Pepsi and prove God wrong? See, because if God can be wrong then he ain’t perfect. He ain’t omnipotent. So if God knew you would choose Coke before he ever created your ass, what sense does it make to say you had the free-will to chose Pepsi if you had wanted to? When God knew that you wouldn’t want to? It wouldn’t make sense. That’s what I’m sayin’. Since God already knows every decision you’re going to make then free will is an illusion and he is ultimately responsible for every evil in the world. Since he created it all, he’s the first ‘cause, then he’s to blame ultimately.

“I mean if God knew that Hitler would kill eight million Jews before he ever created him then could Hitler have decided not to kill Jews or if God thought Hitler would just be a shoe salesman could Hitler have fooled God and gone out to kill Jews instead? Would you really want to worship a creator with so little control over his creations that some little punk like Hitler could fake him out? That would mean God wasn’t omnipotent or all-knowin’ and not really even all that smart. And if God knew that if he created Hitler what the man would do and he had the option of creating a Hitler who wouldn’t kill Jews, I mean if Hitler had been born in the Bronx in nineteen eighty I don’t think he’d have started World War II, or he could have not created him at all, but if God did do all this knowingly then he ain’t really such a nice muthafucka is he? The same thing with White folks, if God knew that the White man would murder, rape, enslave, and oppress the Black man for centuries, yet he created him anyway then just like they say in court, he ‘acted willfully and with malicious aforethought’ and caused the oppression of our people through his action or inaction. It’s his fault so how could you have any love in your heart for him? The muthafucka gets no love from me. None.”

“So you sayin’ God is either evil or stupid?”

“That’s exactly what the fuck I’m sayin’. If God is supposed to be all powerful then he could end the plight of the Black man at any time. He could have prevented it from ever occurring in the first place. You feel me, bro? He could end poverty and crime. He could get niggas good jobs so we didn’t have to kill each other to survive. But he don’t do he? Why? ‘Cause he don’t give a fuck about us that’s why. We live like this because of him so how can you be worshipping him? It’s like worshipping the slavemaster’s whip. It don’t make no sense!”

“My brother, you is one to talk.”

“So, what you sayin’?”

“I’m sayin’ you contribute to the hardships of the Black community by helping Scratch pump that poison, but you still expect people to love you.”

I sat bolt upright in the grass.

“Fuck that! Nigga, I don’t expect nobody to love me!”

I knew Huey hated for anyone to call him “nigga”, even though he often used the word himself. It was part of that Black Consciousness thing he was into. But he had pushed my buttons so he deserved to have a few pushed back. I took some small pleasure in watching him struggle to ignore my use of the word.

“Yeah, you do. You expect your Mom to love you. You expect your Grandma to love you,” He pointed to the grave on which we sat and I winced, “You expected my

brother to love you...and you expect me to love you. Now tell me I'm wrong?"

It was weird to hear another man say he loved me, even if he was like a brother or whatever. But I knew I loved him too. He had always been like family to me.

"Yeah, Huey, but it ain't the same."

"Ain't it, Snap?"

"I didn't start this shit. I damn sure ain't controllin' it, and I ain't in no position to stop it. I ain't supposed to be all powerful, or all-knowin', or anything. I'm helpless in all this."

"As long as you think of yourself as a victim that's all you'll ever be. You need to stop blaming God and take a look at the man in the mirror, dog."

"Man, fuck you!" I roared as I jumped up from Tank's grave.

I started to storm off into the dark, frustrated, and angry, and hurt, and knowing that I was right, wishing that I wasn't so damn emotional so that I could make Huey's ass understand my point. But my emotions just got so hyped up that I couldn't get my point across correctly. When I get mad it's so hard to think straight.

I felt a hand grip my shoulder with tremendous pressure, causing pain and no doubt leaving a bruise as Huey spun me around to face him. His face was a mask of inhuman rage. I watched him struggling to get it under control so he could speak to me.

"Fool, my brother is lyin' in the ground over there partially because of your Black ass and I haven't turned my back on you so you damn sure better not turn your back on me again unless you want to be lyin' right beside him! You hear me, muthafucka? If you want me to understand then you sit here and fight it out with me and make me understand, but don't you dare walk away from me!"

I looked in his eyes and saw nothing I wanted to challenge.

"You're right. You're right, man. My fault, dog."

I plopped down at the foot of a huge life-sized statue of the Virgin Mary. I sat with my chin on my chest, my elbows resting on my knees, and my hands dangling down between my legs. It was a posture of exhaustion and defeat. I remained in this position for several long seconds before I spoke. I never once looked at Huey who had sat down beside me and was waiting to hear what I had to say.

"You know I've thought about all this stuff before. I didn't just start trippin' off it when Tank died. It's worried at me for as long as I can remember. I ain't just tryin' to take the blame off myself. I know what I am—what I do. And I know that even with all the cards stacked against me I still had a choice of what direction I could have taken. But knowing who I am could you honestly have seen me making any other choices? I mean, I could have stayed in school and gone to college. I could have gotten a real job. I could have just lived off welfare or my mom or something. But could you really see me doin' any of that? I chose this and I regret it everyday, but I made these decisions because of who I am and if there's a God then I did it because of what God made me. I regret it all, but what's done is done now and there's no going back. I guess come Judgment Day I'll burn in hell with the rest of the sinners, but is that fair if I really didn't have a choice in what I became, if I was damned from the moment I was created?"

"Come Judgment Day all Black men will ascend to heaven with Allah. It's the White man that will burn."

"Yeah, but right now the white man is in paradise compared to us. We're the ones

in hell. It seems to me that judgment has already been passed right here on earth and we've all been damned!"

"It's just part of Allah's plan. You have to have faith that he'll make everything right in the end. Order will be restored. Believe that."

"Freedom after we are dead, or after our parents are dead, or those first Africans who were snatched from the Motherland and thrown in chains, is too little too late. We shouldn't have had to go through all this."

"God had to test us to make sure we were worthy."

"Brother, please! If God is all-knowin' then what the fuck does he need to test us for? He already knows if we are going to pass or fail."

"The Lord works in mysterious ways his miracles to perform."

Like a tidal wave, my anger came crashing back down upon me. Huey was starting to sound like a mindless fanatic. I had always given him more credit than that.

"Fuck his plan! If one little innocent child has to suffer for him to bring about his plan when he's supposed to be so damned powerful then his plan is bullshit. It's an injustice! You mean to tell me an all-knowing all-powerful creator couldn't get his plan off the ground without the suffering of Black folks? And how the fuck are we supposed to deal with all this suffering and still love his ass when we don't even understand his plan? What kind of God would ask that of us, dog? God expects us to suffer in the name of some divine plan, but he doesn't even bother to clue us in on what the fuck this plan is all about and why he can't do it without our children starving, and getting poor educations, and shot down in the streets, thrown in jail, excluded from jobs, denied proper healthcare. What kind of shit is that?"

"That's where faith comes in, my brother. We have to have faith in his wisdom."

"Is that what Allah said? Or was that Yaweh or Jehovah? 'Cause that don't sound like no Black God to me. That sounds like the totalitarian philosophy of a rich, white, *ends justifies the means*, elitist, Republican God, who thinks it's his duty to make decisions for these poor savages who are too ignorant to understand what's good for them."

"Totali—what? Man, I don't even know what the fuck you just said."

"I'm sayin', only a White God would view human beings not as thinking, feeling, individuals, with their own hopes and ambitions, but as pawns to be sacrificed in the name of some grand cause without even allowing us to have a say-so. God believes in free will, but how can there really be free will when we have no choice in whether or not we want to participate in his great plan and don't even know what the fuck it is? As if our opinions were irrelevant. We would assassinate a President for some shit like that or impeach his ass at the very least. But you don't turn against God because you're afraid of going to hell. A loving God that rules through threats and intimidation? Go along with the program or suffer eternal torment? Does that sound right to you, bro? Is that what muthafuckas mean by God-fearing? Worship God and he'll save you from the hell he created for those who do not worship him? That's a fucking extortion racket! And niggas just bow down to that shit like the slaves we've been conditioned to be. Well, this nigga right here ain't bowing for nobody no more. Not God. Not no White muthafuckas. Not no niggas. Nobody! Any muthafucka that wants to see me bow better have the balls to face me and the strength to put his boot on my neck and press my forehead to the floor 'cause I

damned sure ain't doin' it willingly!"

"Then your ass should start by raisin' up out of that Scratch situation. 'Cause whether you realize it or not, that devil's got you on your knees and you're takin' it in both ends."

"I'm done with that shit, dog."

"Yeah? We'll see."

Sitting there watching the clouds swallow the moon and stars and the darkness congeal into a solid wall of blackness, a turbid veil that hung between us, I began to wonder how I was going to make this big change and if it was even possible. Tank hadn't thought so. He was sure that we would die in this game and he had been right, at least about himself. But did that mean that I was doomed too?

Killing wasn't just something I did. Like I was trying to tell Huey, a killer was what I was. A metamorphosis had taken place within me as I sat cocooned inside the violence and desperation of my neighborhood and I had emerged from that cocoon as a monstrous killing *thing*. I was a predator of my own species, which somehow put me outside of it, made me something other than human.

Could the change be reversed?

Death was now a shadow that followed me wherever I went and that I animated with every gesture.

Yeah, though I walk through the shadow of the valley of death, I shall fear no evil...because I'm too damned ignorant to recognize it when I see it. Because the evil is me.

I sighed a long exasperated breath that emptied me of all my strength. The weight of my thoughts pulled my forehead earthward. I sprawled out on the ground and rested my head on the pillow made by my forearm and bicep.

Huey was so quiet that I wondered if he was still there. I had said a lot more than I had meant to say. I had attacked his faith like a mortal enemy. His faith would survive the beating though. The belief in a just and loving God isn't based on any empirical evidence so no evidence can refute it. It doesn't matter how many innocents suffer and die, the faithful will always believe in the love of God because it makes them feel safe and happy and the alternative is too horrible for them to contemplate. Better to be a happy fool than a suffering genius.

The marijuana and alcohol began to work their magic and spirit my consciousness away. Slowly Huey and I both succumbed to the somnolent effects of intoxication and passed out on the cool dewy grass, our heads resting on an unknown grave at the feet of the Virgin Mary.

As I snored and drooled on the freshly manicured lawn, I dreamt that I was lying in a casket. A light set in the bottom of the casket shone through the Swiss cheese hyper-profusion of bullet holes some overly enthusiastic assassin had put in my corpse. Huge sub-woofers thundered with rapid fire sound bites of various gangsta rap songs in a cacophonous stew of rumbling bass as if someone had entirely neglected to add treble to the mix. My casket vibrated and pulsed with the sound. Each truncated lyric seemed to be some commentary on the life I had lead. Every single one of them was about death.

Scores of Black faces crowded in to gawk and point at me. None of the faces seemed mournful. They all seemed to be having a great time celebrating my passing. I

heard the voice of an usher, who sounded like a tour guide, tell the group of jubilant mourners to keep moving so the next group could file in. Someone who sounded like Malcolm X opened the casket and placed my nine on my chest as he solemnly intoned: *"The chickens have come home to roost."*

I thought he might have given me the nine to smoke the tourists who had started poking at me and posing for pictures with my corpse, but I couldn't move. I heard one of the revelers say something that chilled me.

"He's the bastard that started the race war. He's the reason the White folks are hunting us down. His name's Malik. They call him Snap because he's crazy. He betrayed his entire race. He doomed us all."

I tried to speak to them, to tell them that I was innocent, but I was paralyzed.

"Everyone's dead now. His mother, his grandmother, he even got his best friend killed. If he'd had any balls he would have just killed himself. That evil nigger!"

I screamed out loud, but the sound never left my lips. I was suddenly being pulled out of myself. The earth literally dropped out from under me leaving me floating weightless a million miles in space. I could see heaven from where I was, but as I turned to it the pearly gates slammed shut. There was a sign on the door that said "No dogs or niggers allowed."

The top of the gate was covered with razor-wire and had shards of broken glass cemented into the surrounding walls. I didn't care. I charged the gates and began pounding on them until my fists bled from where they had been punctured and lacerated by the jagged glass. Slowly the gates opened and all these Brooks Brothers suits wearing white boys came spilling out carrying shotguns. Their faces all looked like Scratch. There were police officers with them dressed in riot gear, they grinned at me with teeth plated with gold.

"Can't you read the sign, boy? Go home. We don't want your kind around here."

"I'm dead. Where am I supposed to go?"

"Go to hell, nigger!"

They all started laughing at me. I started firing my nine even as the first shotgun blast blew open my chest leaving a ragged steaming hole. I didn't feel a thing except my rage. Even in the afterlife I was getting fucked over. I was going to get in there no matter how many of these motherfuckers I had to kill. I wondered how long I could hold out with my lungs and heart obliterated by shotgun slugs. I tried not to think about it. I just kept shooting, aiming right for the head and watching as they popped like balloons and sprayed blood and brains across the pearly gates.

My aim was uncannily accurate. Each shot caught one of the suits flush in the forehead. But there were too many of them. They started to overwhelm me. I was taking so many hits that my body was coming apart. I heard a familiar sound coming from behind the gates, the stuttering staccato of automatic weapons fire. The suits began flying to shreds as bullets raked through them. Behind them I could see Tank with that big AK in his hands covering my ass as usual. He laid waste to the entire heavenly host and then turned a forty oz. up to his lips and winked at me. He walked over and passed the forty to me. I lifted it to my lips without bothering to wipe his spittle from its rim. We were brothers. Tank started to head back toward the gates while jamming another banana clip into the AK. He stopped and waved for me to follow.

“Come on, dog. We got to finish this.”

I ejected the spent clip from the Beretta and popped in a fresh one as we passed through the gates into heaven.

When Huey and I finally awoke the darkness was absolute. I couldn't see a foot in front of me. Lights from the road helped us find our direction as we strained our eyes and made our way, mostly by memory, back to the car. It was past midnight when I dropped Huey off at his house.

“Yo, dog, you welcome to crash here if you want.”

“I just live around the corner, bro. I'm cool. Do you need me to stay?”

“You've helped a brother out enough today. Thanks for getting' me out of that whack-ass funeral.”

“Yeah, is your Mom gonna be cool with that though?”

“She'll understand.”

“My Mom won't.”

“You can still stay here if you need to, dog. My door is always open.”

“Naw, brother. I'd better get my black ass on home.”

“See you tomorrow then, Snap.”

“Later, dog.”

I didn't tell Huey about the dream or premonition or visitation or whatever it was I'd had. As I drove through the deserted streets, the image of Tank up in heaven still puttin' in work and covering my ass soothed my mind a little. I pulled up to the twenty-four hour convenience store on Washington Lane and Germantown Ave and called Christina from my cell phone while I filled up my tank.

“Hello?”

She picked up on the first ring and her voice was bubbly and expectant.

“Yeah, it's Malik. I'm coming over.”

“I thought you was gonna stand me up again. It's damned near one o'clock in the morning.”

“Don't sweat it. I'm on my way now, unless you don't want me to come now?”

“Just get here and I'll make sure you cum.”

I jumped in the Impala and flew down Wayne Avenue. I slowed the big Chevy to a crawl as I made the sharp turn onto Lincoln Drive and then floored it again as I exited Lincoln Drive onto Kelly Drive. I inhaled the sweet smell of pine trees as I sailed pass Wissahickon Park remembering when my mother and I used to go down there to swim in the creek, catch crayfish and salamanders, and hike through the woods. I missed my mother. I missed that close relationship we once had. The only way to get it back was to extricate myself from the evil shit I was involved in.

The smell of the trees and the cool breeze coming off the river helped raise my spirits as I headed down Kelly Drive and onto the Parkway. By the time I made it to Christina's house I wasn't thinking about anything but sex.

“Damn, that was quick. It seems like I just hung up the phone.”

“Don't worry. Getting here is the last quick thing that's gonna happen tonight.”

My boys would have been ashamed of me that night. That white pussy turned me out like a trick. I acted like some lovestruck punk instead of the bonafide playa that I am, but that was the best pussy I'd ever had. Even though I had sworn to myself that I would

never do it to any woman except the woman I married, I went down and licked Christina's sweet pussy like it was a coke spoon. Her tremendous breasts heaved as her breath caught in her throat and her hips ground against my face, her pelvis thrusting up to meet my eager tongue. Her body moved like electricity was coursing through her. I felt like a sucker, but I was enthralled by her. I had never seen a woman so beautiful outside of a movie. After her own orgasm tore through her making her buck like a wild stallion, she threw herself on me like a wolf lunging for the throat of a deer.

She made love to my dick with her mouth like it was the most beautiful thing she'd ever seen. She was adoring of it, lavishing her affection upon my manhood as if it were an object of worship. When I came she lapped up every drop of my seed, gobbling it up like it was her only source of nourishment.

I fucked her in every orifice and she seemed to enjoy every position equally. She came with me in her ass as easily as she did with me in her vagina and even seemed on the verge of climax while giving head. There wasn't a moment during the course of the night when she wasn't stimulating me in some capacity. If I withdrew from her vagina she guided me straight into her mouth. If she took me out of her mouth she jacked me off between her luscious breasts. If they came out from between her breast she would guide me into her ass. On and on it went until we had more than half a dozen orgasms between us.

I roared like a lion when I came and she screamed like a murder victim and burst into tears. It was the most passionate sex I had ever had. When it was over I had the strongest urge to tell her I loved her. But my pride and my better sense kept me in check. I didn't know shit about her no matter how well our bodies had communicated. Still, I felt something tender and powerful when I held her and it scared the shit out of me. Love at first sight was for punks and love at first fuck was for tricks. I needed to put as much distance as I could between me and Christina. I hopped out of bed and gathered up my clothes, dressing in a hurry and trying not to look at her flawless body. It was bad enough that I was working for a white boy without falling in love with some snowflake bitch too. I was pulling my Timberlands on my feet when she reached out and grabbed my arm.

"You have to leave?"

"I gots to get tha fuck out of here."

Her eyes looked hurt. There was so much emotion in them that I felt something flutter in my heart. I turned away and continued pulling on my boots.

Maybe she had felt something too?

I dismissed the notion. This White girl didn't know shit about me, besides, the way she fucked she probably had boyfriends all over the place. She damn sure wasn't no virgin. Just another ho with some exceptionally good pussy. Nothing to get your emotions all twisted over.

"I love you, Malik. I hope you don't mind me saying that?"

She looked up at me with those big emotion-filled eyes that seemed to implore me not to hurt her. I stared back at her speechless. I wanted to fall back into her arms and tell her I loved her too. I wanted to make love to her all over again and my flesh was signaling its own readiness with an urgent swelling that was almost painful after so much use already. Emotions were swirling within me like a maelstrom. For right or wrong, my pride won the battle.

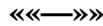
“Get over it.” I finished lacing up my boots and walked out.

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Chapter 16

“It is strangely ironic that the American white man is not really free. He is the victim of his own insanity. The free man is the man with no fear.”

—Dick Gregory, “Write Me In!”



Scratch watched passively as fire consumed the decrepit old building. Soon it would collapse and disintegrate into little more than a pile of ash. Scratch leaned against his arterial-red BMW with the gold rims and grille, watching the human shapes within the flames writhe in agony, trying to escape cremation. One burning form flung itself out of the second story window, hit the concrete at Scratch’s feet, and lay still. Scratch nudged it with his boot to make sure the char-broiled body was dead. Another figure braved the front door.

Scratch raised his .44 and pointed it at the burning man as he staggered out of the house completely engulfed in flame. His lips parted wide as if he was trying to scream and fire erupted from his open mouth and poured from his nostrils and eyesockets. The drug-dealer lowered his weapon when the figure stumbled and fell onto the other bullet riddled corpses piled up outside the front door. No sense wasting a bullet. The fire had already killed him. The other smoldering carcasses re-ignited when the flames, still greedily consuming the burning body now convulsing on top of them, crawled down to devour their flesh as well. Scratch had shot each of them dead as they tried to escape the flames and still the fire had found them. Their skin bubbled and ran like frying lard, the subcutaneous fat popping like boiling oil.

Smoke billowed up into the night sky blotting out the stars. Scratch frowned in disappointment. Burning the entire house down had been extremely reckless, perhaps even careless, but Scratch was starting to lose his patience. He couldn’t afford to let that baby live. It would ruin everything, and he’d been almost positive that the bitch and her whelp would be here.

The smell of burning flesh was overpowering. It made Scratch’s mouth water. There were still screams coming from inside the crackhouse, but no one else had attempted to leave. Anyone still inside was already a corpse. Yet, still he could feel the baby’s presence. He’d failed again. Scratch climbed into his BMW and drove slowly away as sirens wailed in the distance heading for the fire.

He *had* managed to narrow things down a bit though. He’d raided every crackhouse in G-town now except one. Scratch was positive that she had to be there, unless she knew he was coming for her and had already left the neighborhood. Then he would be fucked.

If someone assassinated him while that kid was still alive it would be over, there would be no resurrection. He couldn't allow that to happen. If man's sins were forgiven then all his efforts would have been in vain. No matter what, that kid had to die first, but he was running out of time.

He didn't know why he was so sure that it would be a crack baby. He just knew. It fit the profile. He also didn't know why he was so positive that it would happen in Philly, in G-town, but over the centuries he'd gotten good at predicting these things. He recognized the patterns, the subtle nuances in the chain of cause and effect that inevitably led to His coming. He was in the right place, at the right time, and he was going to crucify that little fucker again, and again and again. Every time He reappeared, Scratch would be waiting to send Him back to his maker. He'd get him. He always had, always would, and that uppity little nigger, Snap, was going to help him. This time, he wouldn't even get his hands dirty.

"But where the fuck is the baby!" he shouted as he slammed his fists into the cherry wood-grain dashboard.

Any day now members of the Junior Black Gangsta Lords would be coming for him, to avenge their leader's murder, and as long as that baby was safe in its mother's womb Scratch was vulnerable. Once the little bastard was dead Scratch would be almost invincible. It wouldn't matter how many times he was killed. He'd just keep coming back. Dr. Yaccub had made certain of that. The infernal energy that animated his flesh was eternal. He wasn't a devil or a demon, but he was the next best thing.

Chapter 17

“Pass me the gat. I gotta stay strapped. I ain’t goin’ out on my muthafuckin’ back!”

—Brand Nubians, “Pass Me the Gat”

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“Yo, Snap? Yeah, dog. This is Scratch.”

“Da fuck do you want?”

“Look, brother, I’m sorry about Tank.”

“I ain’t your fuckin’ brother, white boy. Now, fuck do you want?”

“I’ve got a favor to ask you.”

“I’m out Scratch. I’m done with this shit.”

“You’re what?”

“I ain’t stutter, muthafucka! I’m out this shit! Your ass is on your own from now on.”

The chuckle that came from the other end of the phone was like a witch’s cackle.

“You trippin’, Snap. You so deep in this shit you can’t never get out.”

“Yeah? And who tha fuck gonna keep me in? Your punk ass?”

“I don’t have to keep you in, Snap. The streets ain’t gonna let you walk away from this. You think you can just body the leader of a major drug crew and then walk the streets unprotected? If you ain’t part of my crew then you all alone and that makes you an easy mark. All the blood you done splashed on these streets? Black folks got long memories, Snap. You may try to ignore what you are, to put it out of your mind and act like a regular citizen, but those same citizens that you want to be like won’t let you forget. You know how the game is. If you ain’t a playa then you gets played. If you ain’t a gangsta then you gets ganked, and if you ain’t a killer—you feel me? There’s only one way out of this game. The same way Tank got out.”

“You threatenin’ me? Well, you can save it ’cause you don’t put no fear in my heart. All that voodoo Satanic shit don’t mean nothin’ to me. You can get smoked like anybody else. Test me.”

“You know I wouldn’t try to threaten you, Snap. I know you’s a real gangsta. Just do this last little favor for me and I won’t bother you for shit else. You want to be a civilian then more power to you. But you can’t just leave me hangin’.”

“You want me to spill some more blood then it’s gonna cost you another ten thousand.”

“Ten thousand? You crazy! I ain’t talkin’ about killin’ nobody on the level of Jah Warrior.”

“Then handle it yourself.”

“I can’t go no higher than five.”

My lip curled up in a snarl.

“This ain’t no muthafuckin’ negotiation! You want me to do this then the price is ten muthafuckin’ gees!”

Scratch’s voice came thundering through the phone. Something about it sounded more powerful and threatening than the man had ever sounded in person. It reminded me of the way Scratch had sounded years ago just before he’d blown that Jamaican’s head apart.

“Fuck that! You owe me!”

“Owe you? How you get that notion in your head? You ain’t never did shit for me. Many niggas as I done put to sleep for you for bullshit chump change! I don’t owe you shit and I don’t need shit from you!”

Scratch hissed into the phone and it was like the warning before a cobra’s strike. Rage boiled off him in waves. I could feel his anger like a physical force radiating through the phone, burning into me. I refused to be moved. *Fuck him*. His voice softened and that con-man smoothness slithered back into his words.

“Alright, bro. You got your ten fuckin’ gees.”

“Then I’m down. Should I come heavy or light?”

“This is light work. I’ll pick you up in about a half.”

I hung up the phone and stared at the yellowing white walls trying to dispel the ominous feeling of dread that had come down on me after agreeing to go on yet another hit. This had to be the last one. If I kept this up I’d never get out. I shouldn’t have even taken this last job, but the lure of money was too strong. I turned and looked across the room at the mirror on the bathroom door. It had been a long time since I’d looked in that mirror and saw the boy I was meant to be instead of the killer I had become. I wondered if I’d ever be a kid again. I wondered if I’d ever be able to hug my mother without the blood on my hands forming a barrier between us. I lifted the holster with the loaded Beretta still inside out of a pile of dirty laundry and hooked it onto my belt. I slipped a box of 9mm. Black Talons into my pocket along with an extra clip just as my mother called up to me from the kitchen.

“Are you going out or are you gonna stay and eat dinner with your Momma for a change?”

It was her none-too-subtle way of saying that she was lonely and wanted company.

“I’ll eat, but I have to bounce pretty soon though.”

“Come down here, boy.”

“Okay, but no arguments, alright?”

“Boy, I ain’t got the strength to argue with you.”

I slipped on my Kevlar vest and pulled a sweat shirt on over top of it before I walked down the narrow staircase into the dining room. It had been a long time since my mother and I sat at the same table together and had a meal without arguing. I was looking forward to it. It somehow made what I had to do tonight seem less horrible.

The table was set with fried chicken, mashed potatoes, corn on the cob, and homemade biscuits. My stomach growled. I hadn’t realized how hungry I was.

“Before you eat any of this food you’ve got to make me a promise.”

My eyes narrowed in suspicion. *What the hell was she trying to pull now?*

“What kind of promise?”

“Promise me you won’t get yourself killed or kill anybody else tonight.”

Her eyes filled with tears and when the first one fell the rest came like a torrential downpour racking her slender body. I ran to her and held her against me as she wept. Her hands slid down my back to my waste, to my belt. I felt her trying to lift my gun from its holster. I wrenched myself free from her.

“What are you doing?” I rolled my eyes toward the ceiling and flung my arms down at my sides in exasperation.

“Promise me, Malik! Promise me! You don’t know the dreams I’ve been having lately. And your grandmother’s been having them too. Dreams about that evil White boy you work for. I saw him sitting on his throne in hell and he was calling you to him. You were trying to resist him, but he was too powerful and he brought you down to hell with him only you weren’t on no throne. You were being tortured down there. Demons were ripping you apart, skinning you alive, and you were screaming for me, but it was too late for me to save you. They threw your broken body in the lake of fire. All your skin had been ripped away and your eyes had been gouged out and...and they’d castrated you and left you there, burning and screaming. That White boy was just watching it all and laughing at you. He’s evil, Malik. Just stay away from him. Promise me!” Her eyes were wild and desperate, bloodshot with tears.

“I can’t make that promise, Mom. Not tonight. Not yet.”

“Why? I’m just asking you not kill anybody and you can’t even promise me that? I’m only asking you not to let that devil talk you into anything that’s going to get you killed or kill anyone else. What’s so hard about that?”

It was the second time in as many days that I’d heard someone I loved refer to Scratch as a devil. Huey was a militant who thought all Caucasians were devils, but Mom was different. When she called Scratch a devil she meant it in a more literal sense. *And what the hell was up with that dream?*

I knew all that demonic shit was a mystique that Scratch purposely cultivated to frighten the superstitious and add to his rep. I was just surprised at how well it had worked. My mother and grandmother weren’t even in the game, and probably didn’t know shit about Scratch’s reputation in the streets, yet even they were buying into it. I heard a car horn honking out front and Mom and I both turned our heads simultaneously towards the front window.

“Don’t go.”

“Sorry, Mom, I have to.”

My mother’s eyes were full of worry and disappointment as I rose from the kitchen table and started out the front door, but she stayed silent. She had already said her peace. In her mind I was already burning in hell being torn apart by demons. She had wasted all the words she could on trying to save me.

“I love you, Mom.”

She turned her head and refused to look at me as I walked out the door.

“I love you too, son,” she whispered, but I was already gone.

Scratch was parked in the middle of the street in that tacky-ass BMW of his. Gold

twenty-four inch rims, gold nugget grille, gold nugget license plate holder with a vanity plate that read *Scratch*, the subwoofers in the back seat boomed with a thunderous gangster rap beat that rattled the windows up and down the block. Scratch waved me over to the car grinning that sly carnivorous grin, his eyes blazing with malevolence, and probably several lines of cocaine. My Timberlands struck the sidewalk, shattering miniscule fragments of glass as everything seemed to slow down.

I shrugged on my three-quarter length leather coat with the fleece lining and raised the hood against the wind that bucked and galloped through the streets. It was October now and the summer was officially over. Dark tenebrous clouds, like thick black smoke, covered the sky. Every so often the moon would poke its full round face through the layers of nimbostratus clouds to illuminate the streets. My hand gripped the Beretta tight as I walked over to Scratch's car. He could easily have come here to kill me.

My pulse quickened, my chest tightened, and my scrotum rose up tight against me as I watched Scratch's smile widen, his ghostly white skin looking even more cadaverous than usual. I could barely breathe as I leaned down face to face with him. It was fear. The constant senses heightening, nerve tingling anxiety that filled every second in the 'hood with a primal fight or flight desperation. Something was different about this night. I could feel it already.

Foul smelling steam came boiling out of the sewers. Street lamps dragged long shadows out of the alleys and doorways, pregnant with potential danger, lurking enemies. My head swiveled like a gun turret. The sickening sweet smell of Scratch's cologne was making me ill and there was another smell beneath it, a fleshier, fouler smell of rot and decay.

"Come on and hop in. We got shit to take care of."

My stomach roiled as that rancid meat smell rolled off of him. I felt like I was going to throw up.

"Naw, man, I don't think you want me in your ride tonight. I feel like I'm going to be sick. I'd better take my car and follow you."

"You alright? You ain't gonna throw up is you?"

"Naw, I'll be alright. I'm just sayin', just in case. I'm sure you don't want me hurlin' all over your leather interior."

"True dat. Go ahead and take your ride. Just follow real close so we don't get separated."

We drove slower than usual as we made our way down G-town Ave passing row after row of abandoned businesses whose front steps were now home to bums and derelicts. We made our way through rundown neighborhoods with houses that looked long condemned. I squirmed uncomfortably in my seat as eyes seethed in the shadows of windows and doorways, following us as we drove slowly past. I wanted to empty my nine into every dark corner we passed. I was supposed to be above these kinds of feelings, but nobody in this game really was. Anyone who didn't see enemies at every turn wound up getting crept on and blasted into the arms of his maker. My cell phone rang and I almost wet myself.

"Yo, Snap, it's me. You ready for this, dog? 'Cause I got some real unpleasant shit for us to handle. It ain't dangerous or nothing. I'm just hopin' you ain't got no moral objections."

“Why would I? Who we doin’?”

“This crack whore snatched some product from us and she’s goin’ around braggin’ about that shit. Dog, she’s dissin’ us all over the hood. We gotta blast this bitch ’fore she fucks up our whole rep. There’s just one thing though.” He pauses for dramatic effect.

“What?”

“Last I heard she was pregnant—about nine months.”

“You know damn well I don’t give a fuck about some knocked up ass crack ho. One less for the welfare lines.”

“Yeah, well I just gotta be sure. You know some brothas get all soft about doin’ women and kids and shit. I should have known you wouldn’t sweat it though. You just like me, mad, bad, and dangerous to know, a thug for life.” Scratch laughed and the sound made me want to toss the phone right out the window.

“I ain’t shit like you, Scratch. I’m just like, if a bitch is dumb enough to get her trick ass hooked on that shit then she’s probably already killed herself. So fuck should I trip on it for? If she don’t value her life, I damn sure don’t.” I hung up and stared straight ahead at Scratch’s tail lights.

A pregnant woman? What the fuck was I doin’?

I could talk all that cold-blooded shit, but it did bother me, more than I even knew. It was quarter to eight when we pulled up in front of the broken down crackhouse. I hopped out of the Impala and met Scratch on the porch.

“You ready for this, Snap?”

“You shouldn’t even have to ask.”

“Yeah, I shouldn’t.”

He looked me up and down like he was still trying to make up his mind about me. Then he pulled out his .45 and checked the clip.

“Nothin’ to it but to do it.”

We went inside.

Chapter 18

“There are in every man, at every hour, two simultaneous postulations, one towards God, the other towards Satan.”

–Charles Baudelaire

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The steps creaked, splintering and cracking beneath the weight of our cautious steps and I wondered if they might give way entirely and send us tumbling down into the dark basement below. I could hear the junkies and crackheads scurrying around in the opaque blackness. The hoarse whispers and agitated breathing from below informed us that they were aware of our presence and had at least some clue of why we had come, making ambush a very real possibility.

A crackhouse had burned to the ground the previous night and everyone inside had been immolated. Those who had not died in the fire were gunned down as they tried to escape. Every piper around the way was now on alert for the arsonist. I was pretty sure I knew who it was. I just didn't understand why. It made no sense to me why Scratch was killing his own customers.

The crackwhore we were after was somewhere down in the mildew and filth below and these steps were the only exit. She was trapped. I had no idea how many pipers and hypers were down there nodding and scratching among the rats and roaches, but I had a fifteen shot clip in the Berretta and anyone who tried to interfere with business was gonna catch a bad one.

My senses were screaming. I could smell the sweat, the foul breath, the burning cocaine, heroin, speed, the dried blood and urine, the jungle funk of recent sex and something altogether foreign yet unnervingly familiar. Scratch pressed up against me breathing excitedly. He could sense it too. We were nearing the kill. I still couldn't figure out why Scratch wanted to come along on this one. Why he hadn't just given me the location and the bitch's description and sent me to do the dirty-work myself. Killing a crackwhore in a shooting gallery wasn't a very glamorous assignment.

“You hear that, Snap?” Scratch whispered nervously. His white skin seemed to glow in the near pitch darkness making his head look like a glow-in-the-dark Halloween skull.

“I don't hear shit. Now shut the fuck up.”

I was still trying to place that strange smell and wondering about a new scent...burning wax, as if someone had just blown out a candle.

“*Yeah, these muthafuckas know we're here,*” I thought to myself, and then I heard

what Scratch was trippin' on. It sounded like someone trying to smother a baby's cries. That's when I placed the smell. It was used diapers. Somebody had a baby down here. I guess she wasn't pregnant anymore. The thought of an infant crawling around in that house among crack vials, hypodermic needles, and broken liquor bottles sickened me.

When we reached the bottom of the stairs, Scratch turned on the big halogen flashlight he had brought with him and waved it around the room. There were over a dozen people huddled there in various corners of the room. They shied away from the light as if they truly were the lifeless ghouls they appeared to be. There was an amalgam of young, old, male, female, White, Black, Puerto Rican, and even Korean crowded together on the dusty floor. Addiction did not discriminate.

They were the living dead. Skin drawn tight to muscles atrophied to the point of near uselessness, animated only by their addiction. Bones showing through the thin layer of flesh, brittle from malnourishment to the point where each step drew pain, their souls suppurating with infected wounds that even the hardest narcotics could not remedy. They gathered around the dim flicker of lighters heating crackpipes and heroine spoons like settlers around a campfire fervently engrossed in their quotidian ritual of self-destruction. It looked like some modern day leper colony, a mirthless carnival of woe where society quarantined its diseased misfits.

We had intended to just smoke anyone we found down here, but there were too many. Spillage from the crackhouses Scratch had already raided. This many bodies would attract too much attention after the damage Scratch had done last night. One or two crackheads dead wasn't going to make anyone's priority list, but a massacre like this would start tongues wagging about conspiracies and bring the heat down hard.

I spotted the girl we were after way in the back clutching a bundle of rags to her face, trying to hide.

"Is that the bitch right there?"

Scratch aimed the big light at her and smiled even as he took an involuntary step backwards as if he were suddenly afraid.

"I want all ya'll crackheads and hypes to raise up out of here unless you're lookin' for a quick end to your misery," I yelled, pointing the gun for emphasis.

The walking dead started to scramble, shuffle, and drag their tired asses out into the street. The girl with the rags pressed to her face didn't even bother to move. She knew that we were there for her and that she was as good as dead. Death would be no great divergence from her current condition.

"Here, take my baby," she said to a man who was busy gathering up his works and trying to get out of the line of fire.

"Bitch, we ain't gonna hurt that little bastard!" Scratch roared "Fool get your shit and get the fuck out!"

The old man promptly complied, kicking up a trail of dust as he scurried up the basement steps.

The woman's eyes were full of fear and almost looked innocent despite her addiction. But staring out from a face hardened by drug use, chapped and burnt lips, disheveled hair, sunken cheeks, reminded me that she was just another treacherous ho strung out on that shit. Still, in order to get burned by a crackwhore, you had to first be stupid enough to trust one and I couldn't imagine Scratch being that stupid.

“This the bitch you said played you for your shit?” I asked, staring at the notorious drug kingpin like he was the world’s biggest fool.

“Yeah, bro, this the bitch.”

“You must’a been slippin’ majorly for some nasty-ass hooker like this to clown you.”

“Nigga, ain’t nobody clown shit here! The bitch slipped some shit out my ride while I was handlin’ some business with Yellow Dog.”

“Fool, you call me nigga again and they’s gonna find two bodies down here in the dirt. I don’t play no peckerwood usin’ that word around me no matter how down you supposed to be. Ain’t no cracker ever that down. Stupid ass shouldn’t have been holdin’ in your car no how. You supposed to be a playa you should know better.”

“You gettin’ a little too free with your tongue yourself, Snap. You forgettin’ who works for who.” Scratch walked up to me and stood with his chest swelled out against mine and his foul carrion breath steaming in my face. I put my hand out and softly but firmly shoved him back. He swatted at my hand but kept his distance.

“I ain’t forgot shit. You just watch who you callin’ nigga and it’s all good.”

Scratch glared at me like I was some poisonous insect that he was trying to decide whether or not to swat at the risk of being stung. My skin crawled and tendrils of ice slithered up my spine.

“You ain’t invincible, Snap, and you damn sure ain’t bulletproof. So you better watch how you speak to my white ass. I can have you bodied as easily as anyone else.”

“Now we both know that ain’t true and ain’t neither of us invincible so you watch yourself too, nigga!”

This time it was I who walked up to stand chest to chest with Scratch, bumping him backwards and rotating my face inches from his as I purposely spit out my words, spraying him with minuscule droplets of saliva. I had my hand on the trigger of my nine and I would have hollowed out his chest right then if he hadn’t plead to a lesser and backed down like a little bitch. His punk ass couldn’t draw down on somebody who was set to fire back. Either that or he just didn’t consider me worth the effort.

“See, Snap, that’s the difference between you and I. To me, you callin’ me nigga, that’s a compliment. I guess I’m just ignorant like that. Now cap this bitch and lets get the fuck up out of here!”

She looked like the ghost of Christmas past with her skeletal frame wrapped in designer clothes that were five or six years out of date. Her faded black, pinstriped, skintight, Gloria Vanderbilts gave testament to just how long she’d been tweakin’.

“I ain’t steal shit from this white boy! He just don’t want me to have this baby. He wants to kill my little boy!”

“What...this your kid, Scratch? You got a thing for crackwhores?”

“Shut the fuck up and pop this bitch!”

“I’m just fuckin’ with you, dog. Move the kid and I’ll do this hooker for you.”

“Naw, you pop ’em both.”

“Fuck dat shit! I ain’t doin’ no kid!” I started to turn and leave.

“Fine then, you pussy ass mutherfucker!”

Scratch reached over and snatched the child from the whore’s arms. She tried to hold on to her baby but Scratch drew back and pimp slapped her. The back of his hand

collided with her jaw with the sound of a gunshot. Snot flew from her nose as her head whipped around damned near three-hundred and sixty degrees and her chapped lips split and ran with blood. She fell to the ground sending up a cloud of dust.

“Now, Nig-uh- I mean, Snap, cap this pipe smokin’ hooker!”

“No sweat, my man.” I pointed the gun at the woman’s head...

“*Pleeeeeeease!*”

...And pumped three rounds into her skull, tearing it to pieces. The top of her head went first and then the left side of her face. She laid there with her left eye staring at me in the dark from across the room and her right eye closing slowly.

I stood in the darkness, stunned by my own cruelty. Scratch began to laugh. His huge flashlight was still trained on the woman’s brutalized corpse.

“Ooooooh shit! That was vicious, dog!”

“Get that flashlight off her face, man! I don’t want to look at that shit!”

“Okay, but we got to get rid of this kid though. I know how you feel, but we can’t just leave him here. It’s a mercy killing now. Would you rather leave him down here with these fiends? Yo, I don’t believe this shit! I know you ain’t cryin’ over this little crack baby?”

But I was. I couldn’t believe it myself, but tears were streaming down my face. I was overcome with such a profound remorse that I was almost paralyzed by it. This killing raised my personal death toll to an even two dozen, but this was the first time I could recall feeling anything for the marks I took out.

“Give me the kid.”

“You gonna do him?”

“Just give me the muthafucka!” I barked and Scratch obliged.

“Forgive me,” I said, looking into the brown-skinned baby’s warm trusting eyes. The child’s eyes sucked me into them like a whirlpool, swallowing me whole and dragging me under. I drowned in them and died. I saw my whole life play out like pictures in a ViewMaster. It was all anger and pain, hatred for myself and others. I didn’t like anything I saw.

“Forgive me,” I begged as the tears continued to fall.

“Kill that little bastard!” Scratch bellowed. His flashlight was turned upwards to illuminate his face. His blue eyes narrowed into serpentine slits. His gold capped teeth looked like a mouthful of fangs and his white skin was the pale bloodless pallor of a corpse. In my heart, I knew that it was the face of Satan.

I looked down at the child in my arms and it all made sense. Scratch was Satan and I was the whore of Babylon, this child, my last hope for salvation, perhaps even everyone’s last hope. Maybe this was the reborn baby Christ, and if Christ died this time then the world would belong to Scratch, and drugs, and greed, and murder. The idea sounded absurd even as I thought it, but like the chimerical voices and hallucinations of a schizophrenic or chronic drug addict, telling myself that it was all an illusion did little to dispel it. The more I stared at the pallid fright mask that danced and raged, glowing in the darkness, the stronger the idea became. I decided not to wait for him to grow horns and a tail. I pointed the gun at Scratch and pulled the trigger.

The flashlight fell from his hands and spun off into the darkness casting shadows in every direction as he flew backwards crying out in pain. The flashlight hit the ground

and continued to spin illuminating the basement in brief flashes like a strobelight. I watched as each flash of light revealed Scratch's laborious rise from the ground clutching his bleeding chest. His muscles seemed to be reshaping, elongating and hypertrophying into something massive and powerful. Scratch's jaw appeared to come unhinged and his gold teeth seemed to grow into long tusks. His hands curled into huge claws and his arms grew until they touched the ground even as his head touched the ceiling. Each turn of the flashlight revealed an even more horrible change. It could have been the adrenalin coursing through my veins, a trick of the light, my own guilt and fear feeding some sort of schizophrenic episode. But as far as I was concerned, Scratch had just turned into a demon before my very eyes. When Scratch charged toward me he did not look even remotely human. The roar that erupted from his throat was like the sound of an oncoming train.

“Snap!!!”

I took the stairs two at a time as I ran holding the tiny infant tight against me. Scratch's voice boomed in the darkness below.

“You're dead, motherfucker! You hear me, fool? I'm going to kill you and everyone you ever knew!”

I flew from the house, down the front steps, and flung open the door to my Impala with my heart beating against my chest as if it was trying to break free and run. I was hyperventilating, trying to suck oxygen into my cramped lungs as panic and shock crushed down on me threatening to stop my heart in my chest.

“What the hell did I just see down there? What the fuck was that?”

The child was still silent as I buckled him up as best I could and struggled to fit the keys into the ignition with a hand shaking violently with an overdose of adrenalin and a blood pressure that must have been in the one eighties. A bullet smashed through the driver's side window and whistled past my nose. Scratch stood in the doorway aiming that big shiny .45 at my head. He looked normal again and he looked pissed. I ducked down and finally managed to fit the key into the ignition. More bullets whistled by overhead as I started the engine and raced away from the withered crack-house with the raging white demon slumped in the doorway, his chest stained crimson, firing carelessly into the night.

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A deluge of gunfire thundered down upon the tank-like '72 Impala as it rocked and swerved up G-town Avenue at heart-stopping speeds. It kicked up trash and garbage as it barreled through the somber deserted streets pursued by the gold-encrusted red Beemer. The entire time I couldn't help but to doubt my sanity.

Why on earth was I trying to save this child? Why hadn't I just blown him away along with his crackhead mother? It wouldn't have been the first kid I'd killed. Why was I risking my life for this little crackbaby? Had all that talk from Mom and Yolanda started to get me? Was I developing a conscience? Was I getting soft? Was I looking for

forgiveness? Redemption? If so it was too little too late. I had too much blood on my hands to ever be forgiven. Not by myself and not by God.

But then darker questions, more terrifying questions invaded my head making me want to cry out in terror.

Did I really just see Scratch turn into a monster down there? Is this mutherfucker really goddamned Satan? What the hell have I gotten myself into?

I tried to shut those thoughts out. What I thought I saw couldn't have been real. It couldn't have.

A cascade of glass rained down upon my head as bullets ripped through the Impala like a stinging swarm of angry bees. I ducked, closed my eyes, and moaned like a bitch. I was scared to death, confused, and lost without that cocky, ignorant, madness that usually protected me from fear and doubt. It had been a long time since I had run from anything outside myself and I didn't like it. It was funny, just hours ago I would have never doubted that I could take Scratch out with ease, yet here I was fleeing for my life as he chased my black ass all over creation. Under normal circumstances I would have just turned and capped this punk. But these were not normal circumstances. There was no way I could have missed Scratch at that range, even in the dark, yet there he was ten seconds off my ass. And then there was that bizarre transformation. It might have just been the shadows. It was pretty dark down there.

But what if it wasn't? What if Scratch really is some kind of fucking monster?

Still, running from a battle just wasn't my thing. I hated the idea of catching a bullet in my back when there was at least the opportunity to die like a man and maybe take him out with me, but I couldn't risk getting the child killed too.

The tired, old car gasped and wheezed and seemed to cry out in pain—leaking fluids and spraying steam and noxious blue smoke from burning oil. The tires screeched in protest as I forced it into turns that would have taxed vehicles half its years. I was a terrible driver and for the umpteenth time it occurred to me how senseless it would be to avoid Scratch only to kill us both by crashing into a pole.

Burning rubber mixed with the smell of sulfur and oil, the sound of shattering glass, the whine of bullets, and the screams of tortured metal. Yet, the baby lay passively in the passenger seat as if he didn't have a care in the world. He was staring at me soothingly. A loving, trusting smile played across his face. Even amid the roaring chaos my heart began to lighten. If he lived he'd make one hell of a pimp or a con-man someday. He was playing me like Nintendo. His soft vulnerable-looking, brown skin and carelessly nappy hair alone made me want to protect him or die trying. Looking at him gave me the courage to keep my mind from shutting down and giving in to the desire to curl up on the front seat and just wait for the fatal bullet that would void my brain from my skull onto the dashboard. If any nigga on earth deserved such a fate it was damn sure me. I wondered if this little baby would forgive sins as profound as mine? If he truly knew what I was—a killer without a conscience being pursued to the death by another.

I decided to try to buy us some time by emptying a few rounds into Scratch's BMW to see if I could slow his ass down. My blood was jackhammering through my veins so hard and fast I could feel it pounding in my ears. My mind felt like it was wading through thick mud and fog. Everything I did seemed a few seconds off. Aiming was a joke. I would've been lucky to hit the car at all let alone to hit Scratch.

I held the nine-millimeter Beretta in my lap trying to cock it with my right hand while steering with my left as the accelerator slowly crept toward ninety and traffic grew denser.

Come on, Brother. Get your shit together! I screamed to myself, still trying to fight off panic, emotional exhaustion, and eventual collapse.

This white mutherfucker can't win! You can't let that devil win. That bitch-ass peckerwood wouldn't be shit without you—

That thought chilled me to the bone. Certainly Scratch didn't owe his entire success to me. He was well on his way to becoming a serious ghetto star before I even met him. But I had helped. I had helped a lot.

Maybe I was supposed to pay for my sins by getting my cap peeled in a moving car and dying with the Baby Christ in my arms?

The Baby Christ? What tha fuck am I talkin' about? Do I really believe that this little crack baby is Jesus? His pipe-smokin' mother certainly wasn't the Virgin Mary. What a fucked up twist of fate that would be for Christ to be reborn as some helpless little crack baby in the middle of a war zone with no one to protect him, but a crazy murder-for-hire nigga like me. Didn't the church have secret orders dedicated to this sort of thing? Trained Vatican bodyguards or something? Maybe I should get him to a church and let them handle it? I thought as I fought to keep the Impala on the road whipping it around tight corners at over 80 miles per hour.

“Oww! Shit!”

A bullet ripped through my ear and seared a small furrow alongside my head, inches from my temple. That familiar berserker rage, which had served me in so many street fights, descended on me like a black cloud blotting out fear and reason.

“Oh, you have got ta die now. I don't give a fuck what you are. You've got to die.”

I switched the gun to my left hand and swung it over my right shoulder, aiming with help from my rearview mirror. I could see Scratch's face through my shattered rear windshield. I slowed down to let the BMW get closer as I pointed my gun right into the face of the devil. White flame leapt into his eyes and his pasty face split wide with a gold-toothed grin. Calmly he raised the big shiny Colt .45 and pointed it at me. At this range he couldn't miss and he was aiming much better than I was. The back of my head and center of my forehead started to itch and I knew that the bullet would enter and exit there if I allowed him to pull that trigger. I squeezed the trigger frantically and the obnoxious red Beemer swerved into a parked car, going up on two wheels and nearly flipping end over end. When it came to rest I could have sworn I saw something scamper out of the car on four long gnarled legs...something with wings and claws and eyes that burned like stars. It staggered and collapsed in the street and I turned my attention back to the road just as I ran a red light and barreled through the intersection of Germantown and Cheltenham Avenues.

Twin headlights bore down on me as I hit the accelerator, leaving the wreckage of Scratch's vehicle behind. I barely managed to maintain control of the car which was now doing over 90 miles per hour when my rear bumper was demolished by an old Chevy Nova heading down Cheltenham Ave. My bumper dragged on the asphalt shooting up sparks as I continued up the street with my foot firmly planted on the gas. I kept the speedometer

at 90 until I hit Tulpehocken Street, then I slowed it down to 35. Now that I had escaped Scratch I couldn't risk getting jacked by the police for speeding and having them discover a smoking gun in my car. In jail I would be a sitting duck and the child would be left unprotected. I made a right onto McCallum street and flew across Washington Lane. I came to a rest in front of Huey's house, scooped the child up in my arms and leapt from the car leaving it still running. There were so many bullets in the seats and dashboard that it seemed almost impossible that none of them had hit us.

I know Huey will help me. He'll know what to do. I know he'll understand what's going down.

The Impala belched out its last noxious breath and died as I staggered toward Huey's front porch. The infant was still eerily calm. I crept up the crumbling concrete steps on legs that wobbled and shook from exhaustion as the adrenaline rush died off and I started to crash. I was staring into the child's eyes again as if awaiting revelation. None came.

Huey's house hadn't changed a lot in the years since our childhood abortively ended in that abandoned lot with a child's body dropping at our feet, a gun smoking in my hand, and the gold-toothed grin of a blue-eyed gangsta. The porch's wooden deck was warped and splintered from water damage and neglect and the patio overhead was sagging as if preparing to succumb to gravity and crash down upon me. The cracked windows, old blue and white paint that was peeling and flaking revealing the bare brick beneath, the front door that was so badly warped that you could see light from inside all around the edges of it, was all just as it had always been. Nothing had changed but our ages and my predicament.

Huey answered the door on the first ring. "What's up, dog? You in trouble?"

He drew his Sig Sauer .40 from his waistband and cocked it, looking past me out the door. His eyes widened when he saw my Impala riddled with holes and then he did a double take when he noticed the baby in my arms.

"Where'd you get the kid, man? What's goin' down wit' you? Somebody after you? You ain't kidnap this kid did you?"

He looked at me with more concern than my own mother would have shown. Tears welled up in my eyes and I took a deep breath to clear them away and compose myself. From behind him I saw Iesha looking at me with critical eyes. Even at eight months pregnant she was just as beautiful as she'd been when I'd first met her back when I was ten years old. And I still loved her. Her eyes told me she didn't reciprocate the emotion.

What's this evil nigga about to get my man involved in now? They seemed to say. I felt terribly self-conscious and foolish.

"Look, man, maybe I shouldn't have come. This is my shit. I'll handle it. I didn't mean to disrupt your evening and bring all this drama to your doorstep. My bad."

Huey held my eyes with his and it was evident that he was dismissing everything I was saying. He could tell that I needed help.

"Go upstairs, Iesha. Me and Snap have some things to discuss."

"Don't let him talk you into no dumb shit! I don't want to see you wind up like your brother."

It was the wrong thing to say. Huey's head whipped around like someone

slammed the brakes on too fast in a speeding car.

“What the fuck did you just say to me?”

Iesha’s defiant eyes drifted to the floor and she started to stammer, clearly afraid.

“I-I was just saying...I love you and I just don’t want to see anything happen to you.”

“Go upstairs, Iesha. Now!”

His fierce stare pushed the pregnant young girl out of the room and up the stairs. This relationship couldn’t be healthy.

“What kinda trouble you in, my brother? Who did that to your car?”

I took a deep breath and slipped slowly to my knees as the weight of the evening, of everything I had to tell Huey before the night could end, overcame me. Huey lifted the child from my hands before my face hit the stained and tattered wool carpet.

“Scratch... Scratch is tryin’ to kill me. He’s tryin’ to kill me and the baby and...and I don’t even think he’s human.”

Huey’s eyes clouded over with that murderous rage smoldering just beneath his icy cold front. His hazel eyes darkened and narrowed into slits and his deep gravely voice came out as a hoarse whisper.

“Then we gotta do that White nigga first. If that fool wants to try and take you out then he’s gonna have to deal with my black ass. And I swear I’m gonna split that devil’s wig!”

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Chapter 19

“...Everlasting good and evil do not exist! From out of themselves they must overcome themselves—over and over again.”

—Friedrich Nietzsche

««—»»

“So who’s the kid?”

Huey was standing above me holding the child. I must have passed out or something because I was laying on the couch looking up at him. I cupped my head in my hands as I rose to a sitting position.

“I must have been out of my fucking mind.”

Huey sat down next to me cradling the baby in his lap.

“So who is he? Where’s his parents?”

“I don’t know how to even begin explaining all of this.”

My head was still in my hands, refusing to look at Huey until I had the right words.

“Why don’t you start by telling me where you got this kid so I don’t think you’re some kind of child abductor or kidnapper or something with some perverted interest in babies. ’Cause then I will have to kick ya ass up out of my house.”

Huey’s voice lowered again to that gravely rumble, letting me know that he wasn’t joking.

“That baby...is Jesus Christ.”

“Fuck did you just say?”

Huey grabbed me by my shoulder and jerked me around to face him.

“I know this shit is going to sound off. I don’t know, maybe I just flipped out or something. Maybe I’m losing my mind. I mean, I was all set to blast them, both of them, the kid and his mom, then I got like this hallucination or revelation or something. I don’t know, dog. I don’t know.”

Huey leaned in closer, his voice softening.

“What did you see?”

“I saw Scratch’s face and— and he didn’t look human. It was like he turned into a demon right in front of my eyes and shit. I thought I saw his face tear away, burn away like the celluloid in those old movies that would get too close to the projector bulb and melt. And Yo, underneath his face, there was this other face. Satan’s face. A grinning devil. Then I looked down at this baby in my arms and I’m tellin’ you dog, it was Jesus Christ. There was no doubt in my mind that I was holding our savior in my arms about to blow his damn head off with Satan standing right at my side urging me on. It was like this

moment of clarity, you know, like when you're high and you ain't makin' no sense and then suddenly the fog clears and you can think straight. That's what it felt like, like the fog had cleared and I could see everything for what it really was. And yo, Scratch ain't fuckin' human, dog! He's some kind of fuckin' monster. I'm tellin' you, dog. He ain't human!"

Huey was staring at me as if he was trying to decide whether to believe me or not. He looked down at the kid for a long time before he looked back up at me. His mouth kept opening and closing as he struggled to decide what to say.

"I don't know, dog. That's some deep shit. I mean, I can relate to Scratch being a devil and all that, I been telling you that all along, but not like...literally. Not like from hell, Prince of Darkness, Lord of Lies, and shit. That's some other shit you on right there. And this little crack baby? Jesus Christ? I ain't no Christian, but don't that seem a little off to you? Jesus Christ showin' up here? This ain't exactly Jerusalem."

"Yeah, that's the part I can't figure out. Why here and why me? But if none of this shit is real then why is Scratch tryin' to kill me?"

"'Cause you fuckin' shot at him, fool! 'Cause you don't want to work for him no more. 'Cause he figures somebody from one of the other gangs flipped you and now you're out to take him out. Or he thinks you went crazy after all the killin' he's had you doin' for him and he's afraid of you. Either way he figures you're too dangerous to have around now. He's got to kill you."

I looked down at the baby. It was looking up at me intently as if it had something it wanted to say to me.

"I don't know why I should care even if this is Christ. He ain't our savior, never was. He saved the Jews and damned the Black man as far as I can tell. I mean, fuck has he ever done for my Black ass? Christ or Satan, fuck is the difference? Niggas still gettin' fucked over either way."

"Fuck do you mean by that?"

"I mean God don't give a fuck about niggas."

"Come on now, you know I hate when you talk that shit. You can say all you like about that white Christian god, but the black god, Allah, he loves the Black people."

"Yeah, and look how he shows it."

"So, what you sayin'?"

"I'm sayin' there ain't no way you can believe in no God of the Black people. Not how fucked up shit is for us. Look how we live brother! "

"I've heard all this before, Snap. You're starting to talk in circles."

"But you ain't listening. You ain't feelin' me though."

"Snap, my brother, did you ever hear that poem about the man walking through the sand arm in arm with God and as he takes each step he sees his life unfolding before his eyes. Then he looks back at the footprints in the sand and realizes that at the hardest times there was only one set of footprints. The man asks God why he didn't walk beside him in those hard times and God replies that there are only one set of prints because during those hard times God carried him upon his shoulders. Have you ever heard that poem?"

"God ain't never carried Black folks and we have the bleeding callused feet to prove it! It seems to me that during the hardest times it was us who carried God!"

“Man, that’s just your pain talkin’.”

Huey waved a hand at me dismissively. I grabbed his hand in mid flight.

“That’s exactly what’s talking. Pain! Pain I shouldn’t ever have had to deal with if God truly loves us.”

“So, then if you don’t love God and you don’t believe He loves you and you don’t think you owe Jesus anything, then why even bother trying to save this little mutherfucker? Why fuck around and get yourself killed over him if it’s like that? Why don’t you just body this kid and try to get back in Scratch’s good graces?”

“Cause Scratch is the devil. He’s fuckin’ Satan, dog. And I don’t care how fucked up God is, I know his plan has got to be better than what that mutherfucker has in store for us.”

“Well, then you must still have a little faith in your heart after all. ’Cause if you ain’t got no reason to love God then you’d have just let Scratch have this little bastard, but you didn’t. You saved him. There had to be some reason for that.”

“Man, I was just pickin’ the lesser of evils. I ain’t sayin’ I got it all figured out. I don’t know what the fuck is goin’ on truthfully. But I know it’s something much bigger than me and somehow I’ve been chosen to play a part in it. What I need to know now is what we gonna do about Scratch? Ain’t like he can’t figure out that I was headed here. Where the fuck else would I go? So, what do we do?”

“True that. He’s gonna be right on your ass. We can’t sit around here waiting for him to roll through here with every nigga he can find and do my crib like he did your car. If you ask me we should do just like I said and bring it to that mutherfucker first. This shit ain’t gonna rest until one of ya’ll is dead. You know that. So, if you don’t want it to be you, then you’d better take some action and I mean with the quickness.”

“Then that’s how we playin’ it then. Let’s take your car. Bring the kid with you.”

“We’d better take my car ’cause yours is tore down. How the hell did he put that many holes in your ride and you walk away with just that little nick in your ear?”

“I don’t know. Maybe God was on my side.” I smirked and rolled my eyes sarcastically.

“Whatever, dog. Let’s just get ghost before Scratch shows up.”

“But what about Iesha? We can’t just leave your pregnant woman here for Scratch to find. You don’t even want to know the type shit this devil does. All that Satanic voodoo shit he’s into. I don’t want to think about what he’d do to Iesha if he caught her here alone.”

“Man, I got a shotgun in the kitchen, My Mom is on her way home too and you know she don’t play that shit.”

“Bro, call your mom and tell her to meet Iesha at my house. Why take any chances?”

“What makes you think Scratch won’t be checking your crib?”

“I know that’s the first place he’ll check, but by the time they get there Scratch will have already come and gone. Now let’s move.”

We herded Iesha into Charlotte Turner’s avocado green ’78 Monte Carlo and threw the shotgun with a box of shells on the seat as they slipped into the back of the car. Iesha glared at me murderously as she scooted onto the backseat next to the Mossberg pistol grip pump, but remained silent. I had no words to console her or change her mind

about what I was. She already knew that I loved her, but she had chosen Huey. What more could I say? *Don't worry, I'm not gonna get your man killed like I did his brother?* Somehow it just didn't seem like the appropriate sentiment.

I noticed a small vehicle sitting down at the end of the block with the headlights off and all my alarm bells went off at once. A massive dump of adrenaline hit my bloodstream like a shot of nitro and my hand reflexively went to my holster. Huey saw it too and he already had his Sig out and in his hand. He turned the Monte Carlo's headlights on and illuminated the block. It was the red BMW sitting there with its windshield starred with bullet holes. I passed the baby to Iesha and motioned for them both to get down on the car floor.

"Get the fuck down!" Huey hit the accelerator so hard that my head whipped back against the seat. I shook it off and reached onto the backseat for the shotgun. Iesha handed it to me along with the shells. Her skin touched mine and sent a chill through me. *God I loved her!*

"Hold on!"

We whipped a U-turn that rolled us up onto the neighbor's yard and demolished a withered row of bushes. From the red Beemer came the stuttering report of automatic weapons fire, cracking and smashing through telephone poles, windows, windshields, ripping up the Turner's ailing porch and thumping into parked cars like coins in a wishing well. He was sweeping the entire street with the weapon rather than just aiming at us and destroying everything in the rifle's arc as it swung our way. He was tearing the whole block apart with it as the bullets chased us through our frantic turn back out onto the street and down to the corner. The BMW's lights flashed on and it began to accelerate as we made the left onto Ambrose St.

"Get that fucking shotgun ready!" Huey commanded as a sinister smile broke the surface of his face. "I got an idea."

We could hear Scratch turning the corner as we passed my house and I noticed that all the lights were out.

Where's Mom and Grandma?

Huey hit the gas and we rocketed toward Duval Street. By this time I had the shotgun on my lap jamming shells into it while dropping most of them onto the floorboards.

"You got that shit loaded yet?"

"Yeah, it's loaded."

"Then get the fuck out!"

"What?"

"Get the fuck out and blast that fool when he turns the corner!"

Huey whipped the car into a three hundred and sixty degree turn leaving a donut in the street. He leaned across me and opened my door.

"Get the fuck out!"

I dove from the car and sprinted to a parked car just three car lengths up from where Huey had stopped the Monte Carlo. The BMW rounded the corner leaving half the rubber from its tires on the road. Its brakes squealed and the tires smoked when Scratch spotted the Monte Carlo sitting there in the middle of the street waiting for him. The BMW fishtailed and side-swiped three cars before coming to a halt. I rose from behind an

orange Toyota and unloaded both barrels into the driver's side window. Blood splattered the inside of the vehicle and I felt a great weight lift from my shoulders as I watched the blood pour from the driver's side door in thick sheets that glistened like oil in the scant light. Then I saw something that enraged me so much that I grabbed the shotgun by the barrel and beat the tricked-out Beemer with the butt of the rifle. There was only one person in the car and it wasn't Scratch. Even with his entire face and upper torso pulverized and flayed open by the buckshot, I could still recognize the face of one of Scratch's most faithful soldiers— Yellow Dog.

Yellow Dog was perhaps the closest thing Scratch had to a true friend in the game. He looked almost like a white boy himself. He had red hair and freckles and skin the color of buttermilk, yet his features were decidedly African. Thick lips, wide nose, and hair that was thick and wooly despite its rusty hue. Both his parents were Black but very fair skinned. He had always wanted my job and I guess he had gotten it. I always knew he wouldn't last long as a hitter. Yellow Dog was a money man, a street accountant. It took a different type of calculation to be a killer. You never rushed in, especially when it came to taking out another killer. Who the fuck does a driveby from halfway up the block and waits until his marks are in the car with the motor running before he fires? Amateur. He hesitated and so he'd gotten his ass capped. But Scratch was still out there somewhere looking for me and the baby. He could keep sending his soldiers at me one at a time until he finally popped me or he could come at me with everything he had. He had an entire ghetto full of desperate killers to pull from. We had to get that son of a bitch. It was the only way to put an end to the madness.

Yellow Dog's decimated corpse slipped forward and struck the steering wheel with what remained of its face. The horn blared loudly and lights began going on in the surrounding houses including my own, which was just a few doors away. Doors and windows opened abruptly as the neighborhood awakened to the smell of sulfur and blood more familiar to them than the aroma of hot biscuits and morning coffee. Another brother was dead because of Scratch and I had once again acted as the instrument of his death.

"Mourn that house nigga later. We gots to get ghost before the police get here!"

Huey was right. In the grand scheme of things Yellow Dog was just spilled milk. It was more important now that we didn't get caught standing over his body with a smoking gun in our hands. The police had gotten into the habit of not turning on their sirens when they responded to a scene so there was no way of knowing how near or far they were from us. But there was little doubt that they were on their way. Huey was already turning the Monte Carlo around and opening the door for me to get in when I saw my mother come to one of the windows wrapped in her robe and wiping the sleep from her eyes. Her eyes locked with mine as I slipped into the car beside Huey and he hit the accelerator. Our eyes remained locked as the Monte Carlo charged down the street not breaking until we disappeared around the corner. I slumped back into my seat and covered my eyes with my fists.

"Damn."

Chapter 20

“Be careful, be courteous, obey the laws, respect everyone, but if someone puts his hands on you, send him to the cemetery.”

—Malcolm X

««—»»

“I need to rest somewhere and Iesha and this kid of yours ain’t gonna last too long either unless they get some sleep. We can’t go back to my place though and we damn sure can’t go to yours. It’s probably crawling with cops about now.”

I thought for a minute. Only one solution came to mind.

“I know a place where we can go, but you ain’t gonna like it.”

I directed him onto the freeway and soon we were headed downtown towards Center City. I picked up my cell phone and dialed a number. Huey watched suspiciously as I made arrangements for us. I hung up and smiled at him.

“It’s cool. I got us a place to crash for a few days.”

“With who?”

“Just make your next right. You’ll see when we get there.” I was still smiling and Huey was still glaring at me skeptically.

Huey sneered and shook his head in disgust as Christina opened the door to her tiny one bedroom apartment overlooking South Street. Without modesty or pretension she flew into my arms, greedily sucking my lips and tongue as she kissed me passionately, grinding her pelvis and opulent breasts against my body, which responded despite my fatigue. The girl was amazing.

I gently pulled her off of me and turned to Huey. He rolled his eyes up toward the ceiling and let out a sigh then turned as if searching for an exit. Iesha was behind him urging him forward so he relented and stepped into the apartment. He had to admit, there was nowhere else for us to go. Christina was bubbling over with excitement at seeing me. It almost made me blush.

“I can’t believe you’re here! Come in, all of you. This is Huey right?”

“Yeah, and this is his lady Iesha and this...” I gestured toward the baby who was now soundly asleep, “...is one long fucking story.”

“What happened to your ear? You’ve got blood all over the side of your head.”

“It ain’t nuthin’. I’ll tell you all about it in a minute.”

We sat down on Christina’s couch while she went to get a washcloth to wipe the blood from the side of my head. After I was clean she stuck a huge Band Aid over the wounded ear and dabbed the abrasion alongside my head where the bullet had traveled

with peroxide. Huey's immutable scowl had not diminished in the least.

Annoyingly, I felt every bit the shuffling, shucking, Tomming, white man's dog Huey's eyes accused me of being as Christina attended to me.

Fuck that hateful bastard! This bitch treats me like a goddamned king. Who gives a fuck what color she is? I thought to myself. Then I closed my eyes and enjoyed her ministrations.

"Anything else I can do for you baby?"

"I think the kid needs to be changed. Why don't you and Iesha go to the store and get him some diapers and formula and stuff."

I peeled off a hundred dollar bill from a roll that included the ten thousand dollars I'd gotten from hittin' Jah Warrior just a week ago and handed it to her. Her eyes widened as they spotted my bankroll, but she didn't comment. I'm sure she had assumed my gangster lifestyle was just some sort of act and she was now starting to realize that it was all real. I was curious to see how she'd handle it. Shit was about to get deep now and there would be no way I could keep her out of it.

After Christina and Iesha left, Huey and I sat and discussed the best way to bring the pain to Scratch as the baby slept calmly between us, surrounded by pillows to keep him from rolling off the couch.

"It don't make no sense for us to be kickin' back in this white bitch's crib while that fool is out there spreadin' the word all over the city about your ass. Pretty soon we won't be able to go nowhere in this town. We need to peel this fool's cap back tonight!"

"You're the one who said we needed to get Iesha and the baby safe first and get some rest. Scratch don't know nothin' about Christina. He won't be lookin' for us way down here. He'll still think we're in the hood somewhere. This is the best place for us to kick it until we can figure out how to finish this. We can't just stroll up into the Raymond Rosen projects and blast that mutherfucker. We need a plan."

"Yeah? And why *can't* you just walk the fuck up in there? He ain't shit and them fools who work for him is just as scared of your ass as they is of him. They ain't got no loyalty to him and if they think the mantle of power is shifting hands they'll step in line to back the successor to the throne. You know I'm sayin'?' Instead of walking in there like you tryin' to run away and get out of the business, you walk in there like you takin' over the mutherfucker. That'll cause enough confusion to give you a chance to take his ass out."

"True. That might work. It might also get my ass killed."

"You a dead man right now anyway. At least this way you might have a chance. Now," Huey picked up his cup of ginseng tea and crossed his legs atop the smoked glass coffee table, "Fuck is up with you and this white bitch?"

"Dog, don't even go there with me right now. That Black consciousness shit is played out anyway. Ain't nobody tryin' to hear that shit no more."

"I'm just sayin', you was workin' for a white drug dealer killin' other brothers and talkin' all that bullshit about God fuckin' up your life and shit and now," he shook his head and chuckled to himself as if he were discussing the ridiculous antics of some pathetic moron, "And now you all hugged up with this Caucasoid trick. Do you have that much self-hatred? You hate your own skin that much?"

"I told you I ain't tryin' to hear this shit right now! Don't you think I got enough

shit goin' on without your bullshit?" I started to rise from my seat when Huey reached out with one hand and shoved me back onto the couch. Huey and I have never fought again since that first meeting when we were little kids, but the memory of that long ago ass-kicking still cowed me. I stayed put.

"Sit the fuck back down and listen to what I got to say. This white bitch is lookin' at you and seein' every stereotype she's ever heard about Black men. You think she really knows what you do out there? You think she knows who the fuck you are? She looks at you and sees gangsta rap videos with young playas sittin' in million dollar homes filled with naked women, guns, and mountains of cash like little Black Capones. She sees romance novels where African warriors turned slaves risk hanging to fuck the massa's flat-assed dick hungry wife. She sees natural athletes with ten-inch dicks who can't get enough of white pussy, the bad boy from the other side of the tracks that her parents will hate and her friends will envy as a sign of her liberal rebelliousness. You're her little Mandingo, her Tupac Shakur, her Mike Tyson. You feel like some big time Mack Daddy when you're with her don't you? She play the innocent little white girl who's been turned out by her charismatic Black pimp? She even calls you Daddy don't she? It's all some kind of fantasy to her. She ain't no less prejudice than them fools in the white sheets just because she spreads them lily white thighs for you. When she looks at you she sees the same vicious sub-human animal they do only she sees one with a big dick."

"You finished now? You got that shit off your chest? 'Cause you ain't said shit as far as I'm concerned. How you gonna be in her house, drinkin' her tea, and talkin' shit about her while she's out there tryin' to help our asses?"

"Whitey guilt. That's all that is. They do a little charity work and they don't feel so bad when they pass us over for promotions and tell nigger jokes around the dinner table. Look, just answer me one question, what's wrong with Black women?"

"I love Black women. They just..."

"They just what? Don't talk to you if you ain't got no money? Argue too much? Talk too loud? Dress too flashy? Wear too much jewelry? Expect too much from a brother? Won't let you treat them like hoes? Act too much like hoes? Too bossy and domineering? Too hard and unfeminine? They don't suck your dick and let you cum in their faces? All that's bullshit and you know it. Those are just more fucked up stereotypes."

"I was gonna say they're too damned religious and they don't give me no play anyway. Everytime I like a sista she disses me for some other brother. They all want light-skinned pretty boys with hazel eyes and wavy hair like you or big buff brothers with two percent body fat. An average nigga like me ain't got a chance with nuthin' but the neighborhood chicken heads and I ain't willin' to stoop that low. I want a woman that wants more for herself than the average bitch in the street. That's why I don't fuck with no sistas but Yolanda."

"That's 'cause that heavy bitch spoiled your ass. Now you done found another stupid hoe to kiss your rotten ass."

This time it was my turn to shake my head in exasperation.

"Can't a brother just have a little fun without it having to get all political and shit? Damn. I don't understand why you hate White people so much anyway. I mean, how can you already hate people you've never even met? You got your mind made up about the

whole race based on what you know about the handful you've met. There's like two hundred million White folks in America. It ain't like you know all of 'em."

Huey poured more tea into the imitation Japanese tea cup with pictures of little Bonsai trees on the sides. He raised the cup to his lips and loudly slurped down the Ginseng brew.

"You should be asking yourself why you don't hate all of them. You blame God for everything and let them devils off the hook when they're the ones with our blood on their hands. That don't make no sense!"

"I can't hate them 'cause they ain't did shit I wouldn't have done myself if I was in their position. You think that if brothers was runnin' shit we'd be anymore fair and compassionate? Just take a look at Africa. Brothers is always talkin' about the white man's nature but conquering and exploiting is just man's nature. Fuck do you think would have happened four or five hundred years ago if Africans had guns and bombs and shit and traveled to Europe and found White folks over there chuckin' spears? We would have kicked they asses and took all they shit. They would have been cleanin' our houses and plowin' our fields and we would've been rapin' their women and sellin' off their families just like they did to us. White folks would be the ones callin' us devils. Shit, we was already conquering and enslaving our own people before the white man ever came to Africa. I ain't sayin' I don't hate them in general. I ain't got no love for no peckerwoods. I mean if there was a war goin' on and we had to pick sides I'd have no problem droppin' bombs on faceless White enemies, but when you deal with them one on one you realize that they're just people like you and me. They ain't no devils."

"Except Scratch?"

"Yeah, except him."

"And yet you worked for his ass too, killin' your own brothers for him."

"Dog, I'm all out of excuses for that shit. I just want to cap that devil and be done with it."

Christina and Iesha stepped back into the apartment, each carrying a grocery bag and chatting excitedly. Iesha had been as suspicious and cynical of Christina as Huey, but now the two girls were gossiping like old friends. Huey glowered menacingly at the noisome duo and Iesha immediately fell silent, casting one last smile at the tall white girl before they shut the door behind them and walked into the kitchen to put their groceries down.

"Have you called your mother yet?" Iesha asked, and then, seeing the shock and fear wash over my face, added, "I—I'm sure she's alright. It's just—you know—don't you think you should check?"

Horrible images flashed through my head as I looked over at the phone. My eyes, wide with fear and a sadness in the pit of my stomach, scanned the ashen faces of Huey, Iesha, and Christina. Their expressions were sympathetic, as if they had already assumed the worse.

I took a deep breath and told myself that everything was okay, that Scratch hadn't gone to my house and murdered my mother after we'd left.

I'ma kill you and everyone you ever knew!

Scratch's enraged voice boomed in my head as if I was still down in that basement with him. I rose to my feet and staggered over to my cell phone. Huey, Iesha, and

Christina followed, crowding around me and placing consolatory arms around my shoulders. We didn't even know for certain that anything had happened and I already felt like I was at a funeral mourning my mother's death. I dialed the numbers in a daze as I thought of the reconciliation my mother and I had never had and the look of disappointment and disgust on her face as she watched me speed away from the scene of Yellow Dog's murder. My stomach tightened painfully as the phone began to ring.

"Hello?"

I nearly fainted. I was so relieved.

"Mom? It's Malik."

"Yeah?"

There was a strange tremor in her voice as if she'd been crying.

"Is everything alright? Did anybody come by looking for me?"

"You mean like the police or friends of that guy you murdered right in front of our home last night? The cops were here for hours asking me about you. They wanted to take me down to the station. I can't believe you would kill someone right in front of me like that! I saw you! Is this the type of shit you're into? Killing people? Is this what I raised you to become? I don't even know you anymore. But don't worry, I didn't tell the police nothing. You're still my child."

"I— uh...I'm sorry."

She snorted contemptuously.

"Nobody else came by while I was home, but I left about an hour after the police did," her voice choked up again and now it was clear that she was crying, "I spent the rest of the night at the hospital."

"Why were you at the hospital? What happened?"

"Your grandmother had a stroke last night. I would have called, but I didn't know where you were."

"Is she alright?"

"No...," her voice softened and became very small, quivering with emotion, "...she passed away this morning. The funeral is tomorrow at 9:30 am."

Mom continued talking, mostly chastising me about not being at the hospital to comfort my dying grandmother who loved me more than anything. I barely heard a word she said.

"Grandma?"

My friends had returned to their seats laughing at themselves in relief when they heard me talking to my mother, then when they saw the grief-stricken mask that my face had become, and heard the soft helpless, "God, no." whisper from my trembling lips, they returned to where I stood once again throwing their arms around me. I closed the flip-top cell phone and stood there staring at it as if *it* had wounded me and not the cold tactless tongue of my mother. Tears flowed freely down my face as I stood trembling with a profound sadness I could not express and an anger I could not understand.

"What's wrong? What happened?"

"My Grandmom died this morning. She had a stroke last night and went into a coma. Then she just passed away. The funeral is tomorrow."

"Oh my God, Malik. I'm so sorry." Christina's eyes were filling up with tears as if she had just lost a relative. Irrationally, I felt possessive of my grief and resented her

attempt to share it with me.

“Malik, I—,”

“You can’t go.”

Huey, who had sat silently, staring at the floor, interrupted Iesha before she could offer her condolences. He was looking right at me and shaking his head. I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. My grief ignited in an explosion of white-hot fury.

“Don’t you fucking dare! Don’t you fucking dare! Who the fuck do you think you are?”

Huey looked down at his feet as if he was sorry for what he was saying. Still, he repeated it.

“You can’t go, Snap.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?” I punched a nearby porcelain lamp and shattered it into a dozen pieces. Both girls jumped and let out a squeal. Huey didn’t budge.

“There’s just no way you can go.”

“Why the fuck not? What the fuck are you talking about? My grandmother is dead! Didn’t you hear me? What are you tryin’ to say I can’t go to her damn funeral? Who the fuck do you think is going to stop me?”

Huey kept his eyes glued to the floor watching my shadow rage across the carpet.

“Scratch. That’s who. If you go, that entire funeral will turn into one big bloodbath. You’d be a sitting duck at that funeral and you and I both know that Scratch wouldn’t miss such a perfect opportunity to take you out along with half your friends and family. It would be the perfect revenge. And that’s why you can’t go. Your Mom will be there. Your aunts, uncles, cousins, it would be ridiculous to risk it. I can’t protect you in a crowd like that and even if I could I couldn’t protect your entire family. I might accidentally shoot one of your relatives myself trying to get to Scratch. I know how you feel, but it’s just too much of a risk.”

I collapsed into the seat across from Huey. Iesha and Christina took the baby into the bedroom to change his diaper while Huey and I talked. I felt completely empty, like a used tube of toothpaste that had been rolled all the way up from the bottom until every drop was squeezed out of it then slit up the middle and scraped clean. No way I was gonna let Scratch rob me of the opportunity to properly grieve.

“You can’t possibly know how I feel. I spent the last four years raising hell in the streets and my grandmother still loved me despite all the rumors flying around about me. Even though they whispered behind her back at church because of the shit I was doing. She still loved me. Even when the cops showed up on her doorstep and ripped her house apart looking for evidence of one of my crimes, she never spoke bad about me. But, I can’t remember the last time I sat down and talked with her for more than two minutes. I was too busy doin’ dirt in the street to give my own grandmother the time of day, even when I knew she was old and sick. I can’t even remember the last time I told her I loved her. I know it might not make sense to you, but I need to tell her I love her before they put her in the ground forever.”

Huey issued a long sigh of capitulation and finally raised his head to look me in the eyes. Tears were stubbornly holding at bay in his eyes, pride preventing them from spilling. He reached out and placed his hand on mine. His palms were softer than a

woman's.

“Malik, you're my dog and I love you, but the hurt you're feelin' now ain't nothing compared to what you'll feel if Scratch decides to spray the whole congregation to take you out and winds up killing your Mom or something. I really don't think you should go— but if you insist, you know I ain't gonna leave you hangin' out there by yourself.”

For a moment I couldn't say anything. This was the most emotion I'd ever seen from Huey aside from when Tank was murdered. I stared at him for so long that he self-consciously dropped his head back down to stare at the inarticulate shadows on the floor. I reached out for Huey's hand and he looked up once again and met my gaze.

“I love you too, brother, and I'm going to grandma's funeral.”

Christina and Iesha finished changing the baby's diaper. They carried him back into the room fussing over him like two schoolgirls playing with a doll. Iesha held the bottle in his mouth, while Christina cooed and kissed at him. My eyes followed them as they paced back and forth. I couldn't stop staring at the child. He smiled, gurgled, cooed, threw-up, pissed, and shit, but never seemed to cry. His eyes stared back at me without love or hate, but with expectancy and patience. He seemed to be waiting for something. Something I wasn't sure I was willing to give. I would kill Satan for him, but I would never forgive him for my people's pain. I had no right. No one man did. He could forgive me if he liked, but I would keep my hate. I needed it for what I had to do.

“You still think that kid is Jesus Christ?”

“What?” Christina asked, half giggling.

“Oh, that's right. We didn't tell you two yet. Your boyfriend here thinks he rescued the baby Christ from Satan and now Satan is gunnin' for both of them.”

Iesha and Christina both turned to look at me.

“There's no doubt in my mind that Scratch is Satan. So, I guess that means I believe that kid is Jesus too.”

“You've got to be fucking kidding me?”

“No, baby, I'm serious. You didn't see what I saw. If you did then you'd believe it too.”

“But why, dog? I mean, what about him has you so convinced? He's just a kid.”

“Huey, man, just look at him. I mean just look at his eyes. You see that pain? You see that peace? You see that love? How could an infant have such ancient eyes? This is Jesus, dog. This is Jesus Christ.”

“I thought you always said the Black man didn't have no savior?”

“He don't. But I guess Jesus does. Us.”

“A damn crackbaby,” Huey walked over to the baby still cradled in Iesha's arms and looked at him for a long moment, “If this is Christ then he's been damned too.”

“Just look at his eyes. You ever see a baby with eyes that wise?”

Nothing I said would have convinced Huey, but I could tell that when he looked into that child's calm peaceful eyes he saw. He knew. He believed. He knew like I did, with some primal metaphysical awareness that defied both faith and reason and went straight to instinct, to some genetic memory of our creator. But Huey would never admit it to himself. Even though I could see his legs tremble. Before that moment, I had never thought it possible for him to be afraid.

“S-so if he’s really Jesus then you really think Scratch is...”

“Satan. And not just figuratively or metaphorically. I ain’t talkin’ about that racist Muslim shit. I’m not just sayin’ he’s got evil in him. I’m sayin’ he *is* evil. Evil made flesh. I’m sayin’ that Scratch is the literal Satan. Lucifer himself. And if we let him get his hands on this kid the sun is gonna set on all of us forever.”

“Yeah, well, as long as this mutherfucker can bleed ain’t no way he’s gonna do shit to this kid.” Huey reached out to rustle the baby’s thin wispy hair and drew his hand back quickly when the child turned his tiny head and smiled at him.

“See, fool! Now you got me all spooked.” Huey chided with half a frown and half a smile fighting for control over his face. Christina and Iesha were both staring at the baby trying to see what we had seen in him. Huey was frowning, trying hard not to believe.

Christina and I had finally adjourned to the bedroom leaving Huey and Iesha alone on the long tattered couch. The baby was once again lying in the center of the bed between the pillows. We left him there and lay down on the floor beneath her queen-sized comforter. A sheet lay between the thin carpet and our naked bodies. Christina was wound up tight with sexual tension, but trying to hold back, not sure if I would be in the mood so soon after hearing of my grandmother’s death. Honestly, I was trying to mourn, remembering the strong, loving, cantankerous old woman that used to bake me pies every Sunday for desert, but my flesh was responding to the heat radiating from her, the wetness of her sex against my leg, and the subconscious gyrations of her hips. I rolled her over and entered her.

“Thank God.” She gasped as my manhood slid deeper into her, “I thought I was gonna explode if you didn’t take me soon.”

We made love slowly, with uncharacteristic warmth and affection, both of us delaying our orgasms until they built into a massive eruption that shook us violently; our juices commingling in a rushing wave of mutual ecstasy. I drove myself so deeply into her that I could feel her heartbeat. When it was over we held each other in silence. I slept almost immediately and had a pleasant dream in which I never woke up— then the morning came and the dream ended.

It was a windy, October morning, cloudy and damp. The trees were ablaze with reds, yellows, and oranges that fluttered to the ground in pastel colored heaps. A thick layer of clouds covered the sky to the horizon with a somber ceiling of gray. Funeral weather.

Huey and I drove through the winding turns on Lincoln Drive with the windows down and the wind whipping through the car’s interior like a minor hurricane. I didn’t mind. It kept the tears out of my eyes. Iesha and Christina had awakened us early in the morning with bacon, eggs, corn flakes, and kisses. Huey wolfed down the bacon without a thought.

“I thought Muslims didn’t eat pork?”

“I never said I was Muslim. That was your interpretation of it. I just agree with some of their beliefs...” He forked another slice of bacon into his mouth and smiled slyly, “...but not all of them.”

Christina was growing attached to the baby and had already changed and fed him by the time I had finished showering. He was lying on the couch staring at an improvised

mobile of cat toys Christina had bought from the supermarket and attached to a hanger.

“What can we do for a crib?”

“My mom used to keep Tank in a dresser drawer when he was that little.”

“Tank wasn’t never that little,” I joked and then my heart sank and silence descended like the final curtain of a failed play. We were all just going through the motions, pretending as if everything was okay. As if all the death that had surrounded us for the past week was inconsequential...nothing but a thing. But after a while it became impossible to suspend our belief and we simply stopped talking rather than have to articulate the fears, angers, and sorrows, that had plagued us through the long night. Huey and I finished our breakfast and dashed outside into the street as if we could somehow leave the pall of death behind us locked in the apartment. We raced Huey’s Monte Carlo out of Center City trying to out run the ghosts that were forever chained to us. My house appeared sullen and empty as the Monte Carlo pulled up and disgorged my long frame out onto the sidewalk. The ghosts caught up to us and wrapped their whipish forms around our shoulders sending small shivers across our skin.

“I’m gonna go home, change, and make a few calls. I’ll pick you up in half an hour... tell your mother you love her.” He sped off around the corner before I could reply, leaving me to face the lifeless building that loomed above me. I took the first few steps toward the house and instinctively looked up at the second story window, as if by some magic Grandma would be there smiling down at me, only to find the curtains drawn closed and the blinds lowered like a shut eye.

Mom was already dressed and ready to go when I walked through the door. Her hair was straightened and pulled back into a tight bun. A black pill box hat with a dark veil sat atop her head held in place with half a dozen Bobby pins. She wore a long black shawl wrapped around her shoulders over a form fitting black dress. Through the veil I could see that her eyes were red and swollen with tears.

“I almost thought you weren’t coming.”

“I’ll be down in fifteen minutes.”

“I already laid out your black suit and I pressed a white shirt for you to wear.”

“Mom,” I was halfway up the stairs when I turned back towards her with my eyes wild with grief, “I’m trying to get out. I mean...” I swallowed hard and cleared my throat, “I’m already out of that crap, but there’s just a lot of stuff going on. I’m trying though, Mom. I’m really trying. You’ll see.”

I ran up the stairs to the bathroom leaving her to absorb what I had said.

I showered quickly and dressed even quicker. As I fastened the top button on my shirt and slipped into my jacket it occurred to me that I had no idea how to tie a tie. Mom had always done it for me. Shame-faced, I walked down the stairs holding my tie in my hands and staring at the floor.

“Boy, you ain’t ready yet?”

“Uh-um... I-I don’t know how to tie this.” I looked so pitiful that Mom couldn’t help but laugh. It rolled out of her full and honest, not a mocking laugh, but one full of love. It was the most beautiful sound I had heard in years. She grabbed me by the shoulders and pulled me toward her. I bent down to place my head against her chest and listen to the sound of her heartbeat as she hugged me tight against her.

“Boy, I love you so much.”

“I love you too, Mom.”

She reached a black lace gloved hand under her veil to wipe away the tears, holding me at arms length and appraising the genius of nature’s work.

“Damn, I make some beautiful kids. Let me fix that tie for you, boy.”

She had just finished knotting the tie when Huey pulled up and honked the horn.

“Huey’s driving us?”

“Yeah— uh, my car had an, um, accident.”

Seeing the disapproving frown twist her face as she eyed me suspiciously, made me blush with shame. We had just reconciled and I had already disappointed her.

“Yeah, well, we’d better be going.”

We passed the bullet riddled corpse of my old Impala as we headed up Pomona Street on our way to the funeral parlor. Mom stared at it long and hard then turned her head to look straight ahead without saying a word. The wall between us that had melted away just minutes before was now almost fully rebuilt.

It was the same tacky funeral parlor that had performed the ceremonies for Tank. The same impatient morticians ushered the mourners into the parlor, checking their watches nervously for fear that our funeral would overlap the one they’d scheduled after us, and throwing out words of sympathy with practiced sincerity. The casket was once again placed behind the podium amid the flower arrangements. This time I had to say something. I pulled the head mortician aside.

“Look, bro, I want you to put that podium back behind the casket somewhere.”

The slender old man lowered his wire-framed glasses and looked me up and down as if he were fitting me for my own pine box. He smiled and patted my shoulder lightly the way one would comfort a disgruntled child.

“And why would you have me do that young man?”

“Because it’s disrespectful to have my Grandmother tucked back there like a prop at her own funeral. Like she’s just part of the fuckin’ background.”

“I understand what you are going through right now young man, but I can’t disrupt the whole program—“

“Fuck the program! This ain’t some damn performance. This is my Grandmom!” Realizing that my voice was getting loud, I paused to collect myself. “Now either you get somebody to move that damned casket or I’m going to do it myself,” I lowered my voice to a rumbling growl and leaned in close to his ear, “And then I’ll be looking for a casket to put you into. You feel me?”

The old man looked at me like I was crazy. He was about to protest when something in my eyes changed his mind. He was familiar with how grief could violently ignite tempers and recognized that he was standing in the path of a possible explosion.

“I’ll have it moved right away.”

He shuffled away quickly and a few minutes later the other funeral workers assisted him in relocating the podium on a hastily erected platform behind the casket.

The services went on like a carbon copy of the previous one. The reverend read from the Bible and talked of Grandma’s love and kindness, how much she loved God, and how dearly she would be missed. My great uncle Milton, Grandma’s little brother, got up and told stories about growing up back in the ’50’s with Grandma. I laughed, imagining her in a poodle skirt and Bobby socks doing the twist. The soloist sang and the

church ladies cried. We walked up in single file to view the remains. Grandma was laid out in one of her finest church dresses; pink with a white bow on the shoulder and a white sash around the waist and a white pillbox hat with a veil. She was wearing her favorite wig, the one that made her look like a Supreme. I kissed her forehead and told her that I loved her. My tears were dripping down her face when I turned away and walked back to my seat.

After the funeral, I helped carry the casket out to the waiting hearse with the other pallbearers. Huey was across the street in the Monte Carlo nervously checking up and down the street. My left hand was inside my jacket wrapped around the cocked and loaded Beretta while my other arm strained under Grandma's weight. We made it to the hearse without incident.

The drive to the cemetery, traveling in that long procession of vehicles like sitting ducks, was the longest drive of my life. Were I planning a hit, that would have been the time I would have executed it, while the mark was sandwiched between a row of cars. I'd have had a car pull up right next to the one I was in and ventilate it with gunfire. I was so worried about being attacked that I couldn't fully concentrate on my own grief. That bastard was even interfering with my mourning.

We left the mortuary behind, and my anxiety increased with every passing block. I couldn't believe it when we finally passed through the gates of the cemetery.

Had Scratch given up on us? Perhaps that bullet he took during our skirmish in the basement was more serious than it looked? Maybe I had killed him during the car chase when I shot the BMW full of holes? Perhaps Yellow Dog had come after us on his own and now that they were both dead we were safe?

I wanted to believe it all so much, but I knew it was wishful thinking. It was more likely that Scratch just wasn't smart enough to make the easy hit and was still waiting to make his move, waiting to try something more dramatic.

The burial was a long tedious affair. I kept staring at the road, unable to concentrate on a word the reverend was saying. Just as Grandmom's casket was being lowered into the ground, a brown Chevy Tahoe followed by a gold Lexus and a black Range Rover came creeping up the road with brothers hanging out the windows carrying assault rifles. One grinning white face with his arm in a sling was among them. Huey slid up beside me.

"Tell your family to get down." He waved to someone and it was then that I noticed the Twins along with Fat Greg and little Drew hiding behind trees down by the road.

"How did you know he was gonna do it here?"

"You shot him and killed his boy Yellow Dog. He needs to set an example. He wants to wipe out your entire family and here they are all grouped up out in the open. This is where I would have done it. Now tell them to get down!"

"Everybody down! Get down!" I yelled, pulling my Beretta out of the holster in the back of my pants and Huey's Sig Sauer from my jacket pocket.

They all looked at me as if I had gone mad until Huey whipped Tank's old AK 47 out from under his trench coat and it began belching death in a stuttering staccato. He was running towards the oncoming cars in a full gallop. I saw my mother's mortified expression as she dropped to her knees and rage blinded me. I chased after Huey firing

both pistols into the advancing vehicles.

“Duck!” I heard Huey yell as return fire came from the three cars, ripping up the sod at our feet. I jumped behind a tombstone, narrowly avoiding being cut in half by nine millimeter slugs.

We crouched behind the tombstones and trees as the hail storm of bullets shredded the manicured lawns and sent chunks of sod and chips of gravestone flying. We returned fire with our own torrent of flaming alloy. Bullets rained through the air like we were in the middle of a war. The sounds of gunfire continued without a break for almost a full minute then it just stopped. Scratch’s cars continued up the road while Drew, and Fat Greg chased after it popping off a few desperate rounds. None of our guys had been hit and despite several hundred rounds sent into the three vehicles, it didn’t appear that any of their guys had been hit either. I popped the clips out of the two pistols and reloaded them.

“Come on, Huey. Let’s finish this shit right now.”

We jumped into the Monte Carlo and sped off after Scratch, leaving my family behind, rising from the grass terrified and confused.

“They’re splitting up.”

The cars reached the exit to the cemetery and took off in different directions.

“Scratch is in the Lexus. There it is up ahead.”

The gold Lexus cleared the cemetery gates and kept going straight toward West Oak Lane. The Range Rover and the Tahoe both turned right and headed towards Cheltenham. It was midday and the streets were too crowded for a high-speed chase, still we were doing more than seventy miles per hour in pursuit of the Lexus, stopping for most of the red lights, but blowing through stop signs. Scratch was driving conservatively as if he were unaware that he was being chased or else he wanted us to catch him.

We knew he had to get rid of the Lexus. No way they would drive their own vehicles to a hit and driving stolen vehicles filled with guns around in the middle of the day was too dangerous. As soon as the cops arrived at the cemetery and questioned my family, every squad car in the vicinity would be looking for that Lexus. Sure enough the Lexus stopped in a parking lot behind the First Black Pentecostal Church of Christ where a black Mercedes covered in more gold than the BMW had ever had, sat idling. The license plate said, “Scratch”. The man was definitely in love with himself.

We pulled up next to the Lexus and Huey unloaded an entire fifty round clip into it, killing the three soldiers inside beyond any hope of resuscitation. I took out the driver of the Mercedes with six shots from the Sig. Scratch broke out into a loping run and I leapt out of the car and took off after him. He headed away from the Mercedes in the direction of a small fence that surrounded a yard adjoining the church parking lot. He tried to hurtle the fence in a single leap like he was Carl Lewis or something, caught his pants leg on the top and flipped over, landing on his back in the yard. He jumped right back up and started running again using his good arm to balance himself as he vaulted over the next fence and into the neighboring yard. I followed him, hopping fence after fence until we wound up in an empty lot.

Suddenly Scratch turned and fired a single shot, catching me right in the chest and throwing me backwards onto the ground in a cloud of dust. I stared up at the sky breathing laboriously with a sucking chest wound pulling air into my thoracic cavity and

slowly collapsing my lung. Scratch's grinning face abruptly blotted out the sky. I stuck my finger into the bullet hole to stop my lungs from sucking anymore air into my chest. Now I was able to breathe a little. The Beretta lay by my side and Scratch kicked it away. The Sig was still in my pocket though, with my finger on the trigger.

"Thought you was so slick didn't you, nigger? Thought you was the baddest muthafucker on the planet— Bad-ass Snap! Well, you's a dead mutherfucker now." He pointed the big Colt automatic down at my head and then bent down to place the barrel right between my eyes. "Tell me where the kid is and I'll do this shit nice and quick."

"Fuck you! You fucking devil!" I spit in his face and his grin widened even more.

"Devil? You startin' to buy all that Black Muslim shit about all white people bein' devils? You done let Huey get into your head? Well, that shit ain't true. All white people ain't devils. Naw, little nigger, not all White people." His smile widened further still until it looked like his jaw would unhinge again like it had down in the basement of that crackhouse. His eyes flashed a fiery red as if someone had lit a fire in his retinas, "Just me. Let me tell you a little story about me. Just so you know what all this has been about. Why your people ain't never goin' to rise no higher than they are.

"In the year 8400 BC, twenty miles from Mecca, an albino child was born named Yaccub. He was ostracized by his people for the color of his skin and he grew up hating those bastards that had rejected him. But Yaccub was also a fuckin' genius. A genius like the world had never seen, you know I'm sayin'. He knew things about genetic engineering that scientists today still haven't figured tha fuck out. Frankenstein ain't have shit on him. He'd broken the DNA code thousands of years before the rest of the world knew what tha fuck DNA was. But his people didn't trust him, they saw his experiments as witchcraft and so they banished him into exile on a tiny island in the Aegean sea."

I shook my head and laughed, spraying blood from my lips into Scratch's face.

"They banished that twisted freak because he was using his own damn people as Guinea pigs for his fucked up experiments!"

Scratch scowled and his face shifted again as if it was getting harder and harder to retain the façade of humanity he wore.

"You must have read those lies in Elijah Mohammed's book. That's all bullshit. They banished him because they were afraid of his genius and envious of his white skin. That's why they sent him to the island of Paeon. So they wouldn't have to look at him anymore. But Yaccub's followers came with him and they helped him launch his greatest revenge against the African people. He created a man from genetic material he'd harvested from his disciples. Only Yaccub used magic to alter the genetic structure of the DNA he used. He changed the pigment of the skin, the color of the eyes, the texture of the hair, and even the mind and soul of his creation. He used a combination of science and magic to create a new man that would forever live as a torment to the Tribes of Shabass who had banished him. But he didn't create an entire race like they say in those Muslim books. There were already Caucasians living in caves all over Europe. Dr. Yaccub only created one White man because he knew enough about human prejudice and stupidity to know that he'd only need one. He knew that the entire White race would be blamed for the actions of this one evil man and the two races would forever be at war. He also knew that other White men would follow this devil and his actions would become the norm for all Caucasians. So he created one malevolent Caucasian man to live forever as the

adversary of the African people, stirring up shit between the two races. He created me.

“I’ve lived for thousands of years, starting wars, initiating the slave trade, the KKK, Apartheid in South Africa, Jim Crow laws, the urban drug trade, and the war on drugs. Shit, nigga, I even invented gangsta rap. I’ve been here forever, wearing different faces in different lands, but always there, whispering in the White man’s ear and shouting in the Black man’s ugly fuckin’ face. Making sure you ignorant monkeys never got a moment’s peace.”

“You tryin’ to say that Dr. Yaccub created you? An evil white muthafucka that kills niggas and eat their brains? Just so he could fuck with us?!” My finger tightened on the Sig Sauer’s trigger, but Scratch’s own pistol was still pressed against my forehead.

“There’s a lot more to this shit. More than you could ever imagine. See, Dr. Yaccub had to be certain the two races would never unite. Never ever. And he couldn’t be sure that just having a White man running around raising havoc would be enough. I mean, what if Black folks got wise to what was going on and forgave White people? What if White people failed to take this devil’s lead? He had to make sure that the hate went both ways and White people hated Blacks just as much. He needed a Black devil. That’s you, Snap. Yeah, nigger. He created you too.

“Every generation we are born, we fight each other, and we die and then we are reborn, resurrected, to do it all over again. Even our battles against each other help keep the races divided. What do you think will happen when your friends find you dead at the hands of a White drug dealer? What do you think is going to happen all over the city when it hits the news? And if you had managed to kill me it would have caused a backlash in the White community. I have many respectable businesses in the suburbs and there are many people out there who know nothing about what I do down here in the ghetto. It would look like another innocent White man killed by a Black thug. When you die some industrious Civil rights lawyer will uncover enough dirt on me to make it look like a great big conspiracy among middle class whites to flood Black ghettos with crack. The racial disharmony will continue all because of you.”

I shook my head slowly. Then I squeezed my eyes shut and tried to unhear his words, to convince myself that he was lying even though a part of me, a large part of me, knew he was right. I could feel it. I was every bit the devil he was accusing me of being.

“Bullshit! You’re lying! I had a mom and a dad. I was born in a hospital in front of witnesses. I ain’t some monster a mutherfucker made in some laboratory!” I wanted to shoot him so bad I was trembling but I was afraid that he’d still have enough time to kill me before he died.

“You weren’t born, Snap. You were reincarnated after we killed each other sixty years ago in a Civil Rights demonstration in Alabama. Your cells decomposed in a grave somewhere and then they started to multiply again and reform into a new body. The first thing you did when you were born was crawl your way out of a grave. Then you climbed into some newborn’s crib, murdered it, and replaced it. Just like I did. You’re not Malik Black. That was the name of the baby you killed so that you could steal his life. Reborn but with all the same instincts, the same genetic programming that Dr. Yaccub gave you.”

“That’s bullshit! I ain’t believin’ none of this. You’re just fuckin’ lyin’!”

“Am I? Look at your life, Snap. You are a walking stereotype. You’re what White America fears the most. You define the word nigger. Your lifestyle validates it. You live

in a ghetto murdering people for drug money. Murdering your own people! You travel to middle class White neighborhoods and kick the shit out of innocent kids just for being White, and you even date a White woman that you treat like shit *because* she's White. You're a fucking racist who blames White people for every fuck up you've made in your life, taking no responsibility for your own actions. All your ideas and opinions about your own people and mine are racist as fuck. You are every redneck's worse nightmare. You are what the Grand Dragon of The Ku Klux Klan describes to his congregation when he preaches hate. Your example makes it easy for White supremacist groups to recruit new members. You have performed your role perfectly. But now it's time for you to die so the cycle can continue."

I loosened my grip on the Sig Sauer and let it slip from my hand.

"So why even tell me all of this? Why not just shoot me?"

"Because I need that Baby! You tell me where that little mutherfucker is and I might even let you live... for a little while anyway."

"But why? What's the deal wit' this baby? Why do you give a fuck about a damned crack-baby?"

"DON'T FUCK WITH ME! You know damn well he's more than just some crack-baby!"

"You're tryin' to tell me that baby's really Jesus Christ?"

"I'm tellin' you that if you knew who he was and how he fit into all this you'd kill him yourself. As long as he lives he's a threat to both of us. That's why I ain't shot you yet. That's why I'm tryin' to talk some sense into you."

"But why? I don't know what tha fuck you tryin to say."

"Alright, you really want to know? That baby is God's attempt to intervene. Deus Ex Machina in a fucking diaper. He is forgiveness. His life will mean peace between the races, unless he dies before we do. Once he's dead then we can kill each other, be reborn, and start this war all over again for the next generation. But, if he's still alive when we die, then we don't come back. You see what I'm sayin'? If that baby lives then there's no resurrection. We're dead for good and the races will come together just like in Dr. King's naïve little dream. Yaccub's curse would be ended. You see? That's why I can't let that little mutherfucker live. Because I like what I do and I want to keep doing it. Forever!"

"If I've been around for as long as you have, then why don't I remember any of this?"

"Because, maybe the doctor figured you wouldn't go along with it if you knew what you were and what damage you were doing to your race. *We are* still human despite Yaccub's spells and potions. Maybe he figured that if you were just some angry misguided hoodlum that thought the world owed you a favor then you'd do all the evil he needed you to do without even knowing it. I'm hopin' you're smarter than that. That's why I'm tellin' you this shit now."

"You're wrong. You're wrong! You're the devil! Not me! I know who I am!"

"I can't waste no more time with you. The cops could be coming any minute. You don't want to tell me where he is, I'll just have to find him myself after I body your ass." He licked his lips and started to squeeze the trigger. I closed my eyes and thought about my life, all the pain I'd caused my family, my friends, my entire neighborhood, and perhaps even my entire race. I thought about my Grandmother and my mother and how

they had tried so hard to raise me right. I thought about Christina and how I had taken her love so lightly. I waited for the bullet in complete calm. If Scratch was right, then this would be a blessing. Maybe the baby would still live and it would all be over.

I heard a loud crack and waited for the pain and the welcome oblivion, thinking he had pulled the trigger. Then I heard it again and again. I opened my eyes and Scratch was gone. When I turned my head to look for him I saw Huey standing on his chest smashing the butt of the AK 47 against his skull over and over again.

Breathing short shallow breaths and with spots dancing before my eyes, I scrambled to my feet and tried to join Huey in stomping the devil back down to hell. My feet rose and fell with all my weight behind it and Huey continued to pulverize bone and muscle with the butt of the assault rifle until Scratch's skull came undone and his brains decorated the ground with globs of pink and red pulp. I brought my dusty leather Stacy Adams down on his mouth and knocked out the last of his gold teeth. They tumbled to the ground and lay there catching sunlight. I stopped to stare at them and the world tilted and rolled. I collapsed on my ass in the dirt as my consciousness began to fade, my ruptured lungs no longer able to take in any oxygen. Just before the darkness swooped in and sucked me down into dreams, I saw Huey kneel down and scoop Scratch's brains up in his hands.

“What are you doin’, bro?”

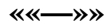
It was the last thing I said before everything went black.

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Chapter 21

“The lower socio-economic Black male is a man of confusion... He faces a hostile environment and is not sure that it is not his own sins that have attracted the hostilities of society... He looks around for something to blame for his situation, but because he is not sophisticated regarding the socio-economic milieu... He ultimately blames himself.”

—Huey P. Newton, “To Die For The People”



I think the gun will fit now. Now that all the words are out. My guilt is no less though. That wasn't the point. I'm not seeking forgiveness or absolution. If Dr. Yaccub really did create me to be a pawn in his plan for eternal racial disharmony then forgiveness is impossible, absolution is impossible. Perhaps I could still have been a good person despite the genetic instincts programmed into me by that mad man long ago. Maybe there is something to the Christian's free will argument. Perhaps I could still have been an asset to my race somehow. All I know is that I wasn't. I murdered my own people for money. I assisted in the drug trade that has crippled the Black community out of greed. I lived my life as the very stereotype so many of us have fought to overcome. I am every bit as evil as Scratch ever was.

The baby is safe. Huey and Iesha are raising him. I tried to talk to Huey about what Scratch told me. About how all White People are not devils and how Yaccub had manipulated us all into believing they were by exploiting our own natural tendencies toward prejudice and bigotry. How the same trick was being played on the White community. I don't know if he understood. Maybe he will after I am gone. Maybe the baby will teach him. Scratch said the baby represented harmony, peace, and forgiveness. God's gift to the world. I can only hope that the kid will do his job. I can only hope that Scratch and I will never be resurrected.

I pick the Beretta up again and slide it back into my mouth. I slide it back until it touches my tonsils and makes me gag. The taste of metal and gun oil is overpowering. My eyes water. I think of Christina and realize that I love her. I want to pick up the phone and tell her goodbye, but I know the sound of her voice would steal my nerve away and this has to be done if my people will ever have a chance at peace. I think of all the rap songs and videos, movies, and video games that glorify the type of life I have led. It's so much to overcome. I think of the baby again, the soft ancient eyes filled with wisdom and patience. He has his hands full.

The trigger is taut and anxious. So many nights I have sat with this gun in my mouth and every time I have found a new reason to live. This gun has hungered so long for my blood. Now, I have finally run out of reasons. No more excuses. I pull the trigger

and quench the weapon's thirst.

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Epilogue

Huey looks over at the baby as he pilots the Monte Carlo through traffic. Iesha mockingly named the kid Jesus. Huey smiles at the name as he whispers it at the child and watches his tiny head turn in response. Already he knows who he is, understands his destiny.

The sun is setting and the shadows have begun knitting together into large patches of darkness. The Monte Carlo cruises to a stop at the entrance to Wissahickon Park. Huey tries not to look in the child's eyes as he unstraps him from the car-seat. He hugs the child tight to his chest as he walks into the park.

The trees have formed a ceiling over the trail, hiding the moon and stars and making the darkness total. The trickle of the creek water running down stream helps give Huey direction as he walks. The sounds of animals he can't identify follow him every step. The chirp of the crickets and the whisper and giggle of the creek water enhance the feeling of solitude.

He leaves the trail and carries the baby down the side of the embankment to the edge of the water, careful not to drop him. When Huey reaches the creek he steps out from beneath the trees and the sky opens wide above him. The moon and stars light up the night, twinkling off the miniscule waves rippling across the creek. Huey sits down on a fallen tree and lays the baby beside him. Only now does he look down at the baby. His eyes peer deep into Huey's and he frowns, those ancient eyes still patient and unafraid.

"I know you know who I am. You've known it all along. I could see the recognition in your eyes the first night I saw you. I want you to know that this ain't got nothing to do with any hate towards you. It's the White man that I hate and I just can't let you forgive them. I don't want peace. You understand? I don't want it. I want all those bastards to die even if I have to kill them myself one by one. I didn't mean for Snap to kill himself though. I didn't think he'd really believe Scratch about Dr. Yaccub creating him to encourage White folks to hate our people. If I thought he really believed it, that he was really going to off himself, I would have said something. I'd have told him the truth. It's too late now. Too late for all of us."

Huey takes out the Sig Sauer and puts it to the baby's skull.

"Goodbye, little bro."

The sound of the gunshot echoes across the surrounding hills and out over the highway. A flock of ducks take off into the sky, startled by the loud report. Huey watches them disappear across the horizon before turning back to look at the baby's ruptured skull. He reaches down into the pile of chunky gray matter leaking out of the infant's head with both hands and begins to feed.

When Huey finally stumbles out of the woods back to his car he feels no better than when he left the house. Killing the baby did nothing to quiet the unease in him.

How could it have been the wrong fucking baby?

He drives home with his emotions running from rage, to fear, to panic.

It's all over. If that baby lives it's all over.

The house is silent when Huey bursts through the door and collapses onto the

couch with his thoughts whirling through his head like a tornado. This had never happened before. Scratch had failed and now Huey had failed as well.

I know that baby is close. I just know it is.

Iesha walks into the room smiling from ear to ear, oblivious, as usual, to Huey's foul mood. She sits down next to him on the couch and smiles at him, trying to get his attention.

"I felt the baby kick. You want to feel?"

She grabs Huey's hand and places it on her belly as what looks like a footprint stretches against her skin from inside.

It has to be somewhere that neither Scratch nor I would have ever thought to look.

He feels movement beneath his hand as the baby kicks against Iesha's stomach.

"See? Can you feel that?" She beams at him jubilantly

Huey looks down at Iesha's distended belly as it continues to undulate with their child's movements. He looks back up into Iesha's eyes and smiles, then the smile falls hard into a twisted scowl.

"What's wrong? Why are you looking at me like that?"

"Because God has one fucked up sense of humor. That's why."

Iesha's eyebrows knit together in puzzlement as Huey gets up off the couch and walks into the kitchen. Seconds later he comes back with a knife.

"Jesus!" she shrieks as he plunges the blade into her stomach.

"Let's hope it is." Huey replies.

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