**Book Outline** – “The Hood”

INTRO… “The Creed of Law”

1. Detail the culture, community, and creed that shape Lawrence, aka “Law.” Readers see Law’s world… his friends, his habits, his Chicago neighborhood.
2. Loyalty is the undertone of most of Law’s behaviors. His firsthand experience taught him that when loyalty is broken, people either end up in jail like his father, Bill (aka Rogue), or dead like his brother, John.
3. At the same time, like most teenagers, Law thinks he’s invincible. He thinks he’s smarter than his father and brother were and is willing to play the game of life.
4. “Deeper Than That”
5. Law’s mom, Sheila, is a God-fearing hardworking nurse. Law was 11 and already introduced to his ‘hood creed by the time Sheila “found the Lord.”
6. However, she’s spent the past five years trying to teach him that life is deeper than what he’s come to know.
7. The two have ongoing debates on whether a ‘hood creed can be true loyalty to black people if it’s underlined outcome is hate.
8. “I Hate U”
9. Bill asks to see Law before his 17th birthday. He’s been trying in his own way to parent him from prison.
10. Sheila’s brother is stern and has been reinforcement in Law’s life. There are glimmers of hope for Law from those who try to fill-in the parenting gaps, but it’s not the same.
11. During the visit, Bill confronts Law about his behaviors that mirror what landed him behind bars. (“I hate you, Rogue…” “No, son. You hate yourself. It’s like you’re a student at Hate University.”)
12. “Warning Shots”
13. Law’s sitting on the porch with friends. They know he’s not as streetwise as he thinks, but he’s learning.
14. A cousin says Law’s at a crossroads. Either he goes deeper and up the ranks with more risks, or he retreats.
15. Does Law heed the warning or stay the course?
16. “Far from the Tree”
17. Law displays behaviors too close to his father’s past. (“Apples don’t fall too far from the tree.”)
18. A near-death encounter pushes his mom to her last resort.
19. Law is sent to live with relatives in rural Tennessee.
20. “Too Big for Your Britches”
21. Law reluctantly moves to Tennessee to save his own life.
22. He quickly experiences culture shock but plans to lay low just for a while until he can return home.
23. Another cousin takes Law under his wing. (Flipped image of the other cousin.)
24. “The Hood Has Two Faces”
25. Relatives warn Law to leave some of his “city ways” back home. They reveal that they live just 25-miles shy of a town historically known for lynching, and still home to Confederate flag-flying Klansmen in the 21st century. (Old lynching tree territory. *Bring in documentary series I saw on YouTube about modern day slavery and the black lady who’s a historian and amputee who seeks them out*.)
26. A local news tragedy sparks debate on race relations.
27. Law is confronted by the deadly combination of loyalty and hate from another “hood;” the one worn by the KKK.
28. “What’s the Difference?”
29. Law finds himself angry and offended.
30. He’s questioned about why he’s mad when he’s on the receiving end of loyalty and hate from racist whites in Tennessee, when he often used the same deadly combo against other blacks in Chicago.
31. His internal conflict that has been slowly emerging finally comes to a head.

VIII.

IX.

X. Ten Commandments – Law establishes a new street creed of 10 key lessons he learned along the way. (Perhaps they can become a curriculum I share with schools, particularly young men, to open a dialogue around the progression of Uncle Toms vs. Field Niggers to Black-on-Black Crime and now, Black Lives Matter.

* Reminisce
* Different environments can lead to different perspectives.
* Someone has to be the catalyst for change. Someone has to break the cycle in our community.

*For my brother, Stephen E. Wilson, II*

*March 27, 1984 – June 23, 2013*

*Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor stands in the path of sinners, nor sits in the seat of the scornful; but his delight is in the law of the Lord, and in His law hemeditates day and night. Psalms 1:1-2 NKJV*

**INTRODUCTION**

My name is Law, but I never follow rules. I've always been told I'm a natural born leader, but the only thing leading me is surviving the streets of Chicago. I'm six months from seventeen, but everyone in my family is afraid I won't make it. All I can say is I'm here today. At least I've already outlived four of my boys; and I've never been in jail. That's more than I can say for my older brother, John, and the stories I hear about my dad. The last time I saw him on the street, I was nine years old. So part of me doesn't even remember the everyday, Bill. Why does everybody think it's my responsibility to break the mold? How can I when the mold around me is rock solid concrete? Anyway, I'm the type who lives in the moment. So if my moment's up, then fine. But me, me... I AM the Law! I set the course for my own path. I live by my own creed: My people; my hood.

I’ve always set my own tone, and I like it that way. My 79th Street Corridor is my set. The set four-block radius of Marshfield Avenue to Wood Street are now black and blue, but cross the invisible boundary line to the other side of the (Ashland) and that color combo will get you bleeding the same crimson those boys represent. It’s like an imaginary chess board. One wrong move in the wrong box, in the wrong color can get you killed. That’s what happened to Dwayne last summer and Joe the winter before last. I guess they were just trying to live an ordinary day and forgot to toe the invisible lines. Ride by low and quick? Yes, you can survive that on a good day. But low and slow, either you’re on a mission to equal a score or must be looking for trouble. Either way, that’s how they both got gat.

Dwayne was trying to flex for some girl and forgot where he was at the same time. Turns out, he was tryin’ to holler at dude’s girl who runs that whole pocket of the hood. He didn’t know. Or knowing D, maybe he didn’t care.

Joe, on the other hand, was all about the rims. He had just got a new pair of 20” dubs and wanted to sport them on his new Dodge Charger. Everybody knew it was him from the blue ghost lights he installed to the undercarriage and custom iridescent paint job across the hood. Yeah, everybody knew it was him. So the one time he decided to forget the invisible lines, thinking he was invincible and nobody was trying to do anything crazy a week from Thanksgiving, he got caught in a cross fire. They set him up. Shame, though.

Me, I’m not stupid enough to get caught up like that. And I’m not scared none either though, if I do. I carry at all times and roll with those who do the same. Ain’t nothing out there stronger than my hood.

My Mom keeps asking me if I’m in a gang. I always say, no. She wouldn’t understand. I know she loves me. I can tell she’s mad and scared for me all at the same time. The way she yells my name from the stoop if she sees me at the corner with Tré is classic, “Lawrence Trenton Davis!” I get teased when my whole government name gets called out. She just doesn’t understand. They’re just as much family as she is to me. John and Pop’s ain’t out here to watch my back on these streets. Somebody has to do it. I figure, it might as well be them.

Mom’s so worried about me being lock up. But heck, we’ve all been on locked down for the past year and some change. It took some dumb mark named George Floyd to get these fools to remember to come outside and live their lives. Now they’re out here in the streets shouting, Black Lives Matter. Since when? They didn’t matter when folks popped D last summer. And where were the protestors when they got my boy Joe? I ain’t seen none of ‘em then, not even to pay their last respects.

Blacks been killing Blacks all my life in one way or another. I don’t think I’ve ever known a time when it wasn’t that way, at least not in my hood. It’s the survival of the fittest out there. So now just because this white cop put his knee on a brother, we all worked up. Now we woke! Ya’ll can miss me with that.

To me, George was weak. How you just let anybody pin you to the ground like some caught wild animal? He was just a dumb mark. Marked by the police before he even stepped foot out his door. We all are. That’s why I don’t roll out in these streets alone. Somebody’s watching my back at all times, and I’ve got theirs ‘til I can’t anymore.

**Chapter 1** ~ **Deeper Than That**

*No one could’ve ever told me that in 2020 I’d wake up to a cross burning in my cousin’s front yard. I would’ve said you were lying, hallucinating, or having a bad dream. I was having a bad dream, right?*

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“Law. Law? Are you up?

“Ma,” Law slurred, still groggy and half annoyed.

“Are you?”

“Ma?”

“Are you dressed for school?”

“Mom, why are you checking on me like I’m still a little boy?”

“Because sometimes you still act like one,” Sheila said. “Besides, I don’t want another call from that school of yours saying you were tardy for first period class. It’s the first day of the week, so you can get off to a fresh start.”

“It’s just a study hall, Ma,” Law said, emerging fully dressed out of his bedroom. “Who needs a study hall first thing in the morning?”

“Someone like you who didn’t finish his homework the night before, that’s who.”

“Look Ma, we’re doing good that I even still go to school. Do you know how many of my boys don’t even show their faces there no more?”

“They’re not my concern. You are, Law.

“Don’t you have any other clean clothes to wear? You used to wear all kinds of colored shirts, all the fancy name brands, too. Now, if it’s not a crisp clean white T-shirt and them sad sagging blue jeans, it’s not a part of your wardrobe. What’s that all about?”

“Ma, it’s nothing. It’s just what all my friends in my crew like to wear. Do we have any Fruit Loops left,” shifting the subject while opening the kitchen cabinet doors?

“Your crew, huh. I’m watching you, Lawrence, and you better not be in a gang!”

“So now just because I wear a white shirt and some blue jeans, I’m in a gang? What makes you assume that about your only son?”

“What makes me assume it is that you’re my youngest son, not my only one. Little John may not be with us anymore, but he’s always in my heart. And I know full well what took him away from me, and it started with something as simple as a white T-shirt, Law.”

“Okay, why our talks gotta be so heavy first thing in the morning? Ma, don’t worry so much. I’m good.”

“I hope so. I just know that when I’m looking at that cocoa brown face and hooded brown eyes of yours, they’re just as mysterious as your father’s. And all he seemed to know how to do was keep secrets from me. I just don’t want that for you...”

“I get it, but I’m my own person. His mistakes were his to make, and I’ve got my own.”

“But what I’m saying is that some mistakes are a waste of time when the outcome has already been proven.”

“You’re starting to sound like Grandma.”

“As much as I hate to admit it, you’re not wrong. Some of the things she used to say to me make perfect sense now. So I’m passing them on to you the best I can.

“I wish I would have learned some lessons from schoolbooks and family talks rather than feeling the need to try everything myself. That’s all I’m saying. You don’t have to follow everyone else’s lifestyle like it’s the blueprint for your life. Not even if it’s your father’s.”

“Then we’re on the same page. I have no intention on following his blueprint. Like I said, I have my own life and my own plan. That’s all that should concern you.”

“Boy, until you are full grown and taking care of yourself, I’ll concern myself with anything and everything that concerns you. Now finish that cereal so you won’t miss your bus. The next one should be pulling up to the light in another fifteen minutes or so.”

“Ma, I haven’t been on the CTA all semester. I told you Tré has his own car now. I’m riding with him.”

“And I told you I don’t like you riding in that car with him all the time. He’s not the same boy I watched grow up, Law. Besides, how’d a seventeen-year-old end up with a new car anyway? I know for darn sure his mama can’t afford it.”

“Ma, you know he works at McDonald’s.”

“Exactly…and what boy do you know affords a new car on a hamburger salary? I’m not stupid, Law.”

“You worry too much about stuff not worth worrying over. I’ll be fine. I always am.”

Our old window panes suddenly begin to rattle from the vibration of sound. I’d know those woofer speakers anywhere, even from our third-floor apartment. I can’t be too careful, though. I need to be sure. Growing up in the hood teaches you to peek through a window first. Mom hates me touching her girly white chiffon curtains, always saying I watch too many *Chicago PD* episodes. I’m actually more of a *Law and Order* guy, of course. Either way, I see a glimpse of who I want to become pulling up to the curb. I want my independence and own money, too. I want enough to buy my own car and take care of Mom. I want enough to have anything I want.

At least I still have the desire and drive to even want. Most mo-fo’s my age just desire and take. They skip the wanting and wishing stage all together. They just take. Take what someone else made, bought, earned, whatever. They just take it. At least I’m willing to hustle for what I want, and I don’t consider theft a hustle. Instead, I’m just helping to stimulate the economy, contributing to the steady flow of supply and demand. The folks on 79th have a demand for drugs. I’m just helping with the supply.

“Law, who’s making all that noise this early in the morning?” Sheila asked, taking off her sleep cap and tying her housecoat strings.

“Okay Mom, I’m up… Tré’s outside.”

“That’s him making all that racket? It’s that black Camry with the dark tinted windows, ain’t it?” Sheila asked, now peeking out the corner of the window herself. “So he just pulls up like some *Knight Rider* from an old TV show, huh? And since when does Tré come to his Big Cousin Sheila’s house and not even come in to speak?”

“Since you don’t want us to be late for school, that’s when.”

“Boy, where did you get that mouth?”

“Word on the street is that I got it from you!”

“Just hush!”

“You know you were ‘Sassy Shay’ back in the day. I heard the stories from your old crew. So don’t go acting all brand new up in here.”

“Boy, if you don’t get out of my face.”

“Alright, I’ve gotta go for real, Ma.”

I grab my black hoodie and half-empty backpack from the kitchen chair. One more check to make sure my kicks are clean and white. I can’t have scuffs on my Jordans. I sling the bag over one should and head towards the apartment door.

“Wait, didn’t you forget something?”

“Oh, I got you, girl…slow your roll.”

“Boy, I will still put you over my knee and wear you out,” Shelia said sternly, yet lovingly.

“I’ve got you, Ma. How could I forget my favorite girl,” Law said, planting a goodbye kiss on his mother’s cheek.

I jog down the dominos of stairs from apartment 3E and open the creaking glass inset door before. I take a minute to breathe in the fresh air and freedom from the tower of red bricks that shielded me through the dark night. I could see the streetlights and traffic flow from inside, but the energy on the sidewalk is tangible. Music vibrates under my feet. Old men converse at the corner in front of the liquor store. I can smell the savor of cooked bacon and grilled onions from the hotdog spot, too. I gather my focus and finally walk towards Tré’s car, grab the handle, and slide into the front seat in a seamless motion.

 “What up, cuz?”

“Hey, what’s up.”

“Nothing much,” Tré said, tipping the brim of his Bulls baseball cap, then pulling away quickly from the curb.

“I hit you up last night, man?”

“I know shorty. I was with my girl and uh… didn’t see your text until this morning.”

“I bet you didn’t. Ha!”

“Stay out of grown folks’ business, youngster,” Tré said, taunting and bragging at the same time.

“Youngster? You got all of one year over me, that’s it. You only get away with half the stuff you pull because your mom works nights,” Law clapped back. “You’re over there talkin’ like you got the keys to your own crib or something.”

“I basically do have my own spot. She ain’t hardly ever there.”

“That’s because she’s out there holding down two jobs trying to keep a roof over ya’ll heads.”

“I know. Trust me. All jokes aside, I know she’s busting her butt for me and my lil’ sisters.

“My mom’s always asking about you. Wondering why you don’t come in and say hi no more.”

“I know. I just don’t want to be feeling no kinda’ way around her, you know? It’s like, she knows stuff without me ever saying it. I don’t want to have to lie to her or have to hide her body if she accidently finds something out,” Tré said.

“You ain’t hiding no bodies, especially my Mom’s. She gets on my last nerve too sometimes, but that’s still my girl.”

“I know that’s your girl. She’s good people. I’m just glad I don’t have to live with her and hear that mouth all the time. ‘Jesus this; come to church with me that…’ She be doing the most at all times!”

“Don’t worry about Mom, worry about yours and what she’s gonna do when she realizes your girl been in her bedroom! She’s gonna kill yo’ ass and I hope I’m there to see it.”

“There you go hating as usual. I got mad respect for my Mom. It’s those chicken-heads out here who I couldn’t care less for.”

“Oh, sounds like your girlfriend just got downgraded.”

“Nah, she’s cool and all. I’m just not locked in on her. It’s not like I’m ready to settle down. I’m still young.”

“*Now* who’s the youngster?” Law asked.

“Hey…looks like you missed your last turn.”

“Nah, I need you to make a run with me before I drop you off.”

“Alright. Where to?”

“Just on the other side of Stoney Island. I told my co-worker I’d meet him there around eight o’clock. It’s right up here on the next block,” Tré said.

I don’t know where we’re going or who his co-worker is, but I trust Tré with my life. On my Mama, I do! He’s not just part of my hood. He’s blood. I’ve heard that some of them who run with him out of McDonald’s live in this pocket. Can’t be mad at a brother for starting a side hustle. Even Mom knows you can’t afford the finer things in life on a hamburger salary.

They’re only running light stuff anyway. It’s all natural pharmaceuticals if you ask me. At some point, everything he sales started out as a plant, a tree, or a seed or came from a plant, a tree, or a seed. So if God didn’t want it in the Earth, He wouldn’t have placed it in the ground. I’ve been running lightweight jobs at school here and there. But I’m ready for something more. Maybe this is a test run to see if I’m ready to pull more weight. I’ve got to act chill, though. I don’t want to come off too eager. I need Tré and the crew to know that I’m down for whatever…

“Law. Law? Law!”

“What man?”

“*What?* I’ve been calling your name for a minute. I parked and everything and you never even flinched. You daydreaming or something?”

“Naw, that’s because I don’t flinch. I heard you.” Law said, trying to regain his iron-like composure. “What’s up?”

“Come to the door with me and watch my back, and the car. I don’t want anybody knowing where my spot is in case they looking to start something later.”

“I got you.”

“And give me your backpack. I need it for a few.”

“Yeah, whatever.”

Red car. Blue car. Green car. Go! I feel like I’m playing a round of “that’s my car,” like when I was a kid. But, I’ve got to watch these cars like a memory game just in case one tries to circle back on me. I have to keep watch. Keep my head on a swivel. Be mindful of my surroundings. It’s like counting cards in a game of Spades. If I remember what’s already been played, and know the number of cards already played, I’m less likely to get caught short-handed later.

So far so good.

That’s a fine honey right there…

No, I’ve got to stay focused. There’s a method to my madness. I need to help my Mom; prove I can be the man of the house. That’s why Tré has these extra-curricular job activities anyway. He talks about me being a mama’s boy, while he’s out here hustling so he can help his own. All his mom knows is that Tré put the lights and gas in his name, and he pays for his sisters’ cellphones, too. Now if she wants to believe a Happy Meal check covers all of that each month, then fine.

I still think it’s admirable for him to try that hard. I plan to do the same thing for Mom. I don’t want her out here worrying and working hard on her own, while her folks who either locked up or buried six-feet under and can’t help her none. I want to be the one who makes a difference. I’m gonna make her life easier. I just gotta prove myself to Tré.

I’ve probably been standing watch fifteen minutes but it feels like thirty. Here comes Tré now. My backpack is now filled and fully zipped. He gives me a look and we instinctively head back to the car and drive in silence a short distance away. Tré makes another pit stop, this time in an alley; pops the trunk, and grabs the backpack he’d tossed in the back seat a few minutes before. I start to get out too, but Tré’s extended hand was enough for me to know to be still. Tré opens the car door, this time handing me my once again deflated backpack like nothing ever happened.

“Now let’s get your butt to school,” Tré said, pulling out onto the main street.

“Me? What about you?”

“I’m good. I’m already in my senior year. You’ve got to get there.”

“You’re barely there. Being a senior, and being a graduating senior are two different things. Besides, what are you gonna do with that product you just picked up?”

“I’m gonna do what any good business man would do, sell it.”

“Don’t you need my help?”

“Naw, man, I don’t.”

“Wait. So you pick me up to make the ride with you, use my backpack for your pick up, and then leave me out of it completely?”

“I don’t ever leave you out completely,” Tré recanted. “You just said everything I let you be a part of with the whole thing. You just too needy, man. Chill. You can’t just jump out here like that. You’ll end up getting somebody killed.

“You’ve got to learn this business in baby steps,” Tré added. “You should be glad I care enough not to make you my runner since you’re still a juvie. You know how many mo’s out here would have you as their human body armor. I’m trying to bring you up in the game the right way.”

“Man, I’m just trying to come up, that’s all,” Law said. “I’m not a baby. I just want you to see that I’ve got just as much heart as you do.”

“I get all that. What I’m trying to make you see is how to be smart while you’re at it. I’m gonna put you on, but you gotta chill.”

“I’m ready, Tré. I’m telling you. I’m ready. Stop holding me back!”

“Law, get out my car before I throw you out.”

**Chapter 2 ~ I Hate U**

“Mr. Davis, how nice of you to join us today.”

“Mr. Spence, I’m glad you acknowledge the king’s arrival and all, but I’ll allow you to call me Law.”

Homeroom class breaks out into laughter like they always do. I’ve got to give the people what they want, right? They need a little bit of humor to break up the monotony of Mr. Spence. He sounds just like the teacher from Charlie Brown after a few minutes. Besides, half these kids still shell-shocked from COVID, wearing masks and the whole nine yards like they about to die from a sneeze. Hell, I’m more likely to die stepping outside my door than I am in a room filled with people.

I take a couple more steps towards the middle row, and slide into my one-armed desk seat just in time to hear my name officially called for attendance.

“Present.”

“What up, Law?”

“Hey what up, man,” I answered back, looking over my left shoulder.

Bass was my go-to guy at the school. He was an aspiring DJ, and either was always spinning records at someone’s party or knew the guys who did. He was the only one I rolled with on and off campus. The rest of them fools only knew me in bits and pieces. Either they knew the class clown version of me, the streetwise entrepreneur in the making, or the low-key Mama’s boy. Few will ever see all of me. Ever.

After homeroom, I go through the bulk of my scheduled classes. Honestly though, the only ones I pay attention to is gym so I can hoop some ball; and Algebra II so I can learn how to catch any missing dollars before somebody slips one over on me. It’s all about the missing equation for me. Then there’s Mrs. Brooks’ sixth period Civics class. I like our debates on current events. I promise you, if it wasn’t for that and the occasional movie she shows to us to prove a point, I’d never come back to class after lunch. Any other teacher could just forget it.

Mrs. Brooks showed us this one old school movie called *Higher Learning,* then compared the white supremacy in it to the alt-right protestors of this so-called Black Lives Matters movement. It’s all a bunch of bull if you ask me. Everybody black I know who died, was killed by another black person who didn’t give a damn if they lived or not. But Mrs. Brooks seems to think that the kids my age are only walking out what white supremacy taught us by default – to hate ourselves by hating one another all the way from slavery ‘til now. I don’t see the connection, though. To me that was four hundred years ago. Literally. What does that got to do with me now?

“Alright class, I know I usually tell you to put your cellphones away, but today I want you to use them,” Mrs. Brooks said. “I want each of you to run a Google search on Nathaniel Woods and tell me what you find.”

“…I see an article here about a Nathaniel Woods who was recently executed,” said one student near the front of the class.

“Yes, that’s the one we’re looking for,” Mrs. Brooks replied. “What else do we see, class?”

Another one added, “The news story I found says that it sounds like he got framed for a murder he didn’t commit.”

“A murder of whom and where?”

“Mrs. Brooks,” another student chimes in, “it says that he was accused of killing three police officers in Alabama who raided a crack house. But it also says, it was a lot of controversy about him being accused and convicted of murder in the first place because he never held the gun or pulled the trigger.”

“Exactly. We live in a society and in a time where you can technically be innocent, but tried, convicted in a court of law, and then sentenced to death for being in the wrong place at the wrong time,” Mrs. Brooks added. “There was also an outstanding warrant on Mr. Woods for an unrelated charge, which the police officers used as a reason to return to the house to arrest him, when the original person they went to arrest was not even there.”

“It sounds like they were just looking for somebody to mess with that day to me. Maybe they had an arrest quota to meet or something. You know they do that, right?”

“That could be part of it, Law. However, let’s go deeper. Why do you think they felt compelled to specifically seek something out about Mr. Woods? And do you think the setting and context of the event plays a role in that?”

“I don’t know for certain, but I do think the cops got to the house to make this big bust and when it didn’t happen, they had shade on their face and were looking for a way to make it all count. So, seeing it was a crack house and all, they probably figured, ‘somebody in this house has to have done something wrong or they wouldn’t be up in here in the first place.’ It wasn’t like they rolled up on the Taj Mahal or something!”

“Settle down class,” Mrs. Brooks said, regaining the class’ attention from the laugher. “Law, that’s one way to think of how things happened and the context. However, let’s consider the context of the location. Alabama. A deep Southern state, with deeply rooted Southern values. Could it be that since those three police officers were white and Mr. Woods was black that the courts of Alabama were predisposed to think and react a certain way?”

“I see where you’re going now, Mrs. Brooks. You think it was a racial thing, don’t you?”

“Law, and all of you class, listen to this open letter excerpt that I’m about to read. Then decide for yourselves. It was written to Alabama’s Governor Kay Ivey on March 3, 2020 and part of it reads…

*‘In just two days, your state, and the state I was born in, is set to kill a man who is very likely innocent. Fifty-five years ago, my father, Martin Luther King, Jr., led a march from Selma, Alabama, where he and fellow civil rights activists were killed and beaten. Under your watch, Alabama is about to produce yet another tragic injustice. It is about time we learn from our past, and be on the right side of history. Killing this African American man, whose case appears to have been strongly mishandled by the courts, could produce and irreversible injustice. Are you willing to allow a potentially innocent man to be executed?’*

“It is signed, ‘Respectfully yours, Martin Luther King, III.’ What do you think about the context now? I think his letter is letting us know that hate can be generational and a learned behavior if we don’t intervene to stop it. It’s almost as if this nation has a University of Hate, but someone, a judge, a citizen, someone has to spark the change. From that perspective, how does this weigh on our civic responsibilities to do something?”

“Well Mrs. Brooks, it’s a little late to do something for this dude. They’ve already fried him!”

“Actually Law, he was killed by lethal injection. And what we can do now class is stand up for the rights of black people as American citizens to have equal access to a fair and just legal system. We can speak out against injustices. We can vote for impartial judges and governors. And we can get actively involved in being part of the solutions in our local neighborhoods, too. That’s part of what we can do.”

“I feel sorry for dude and all, but what does what’s going on in Alabama have to do with me all the way up here in Chicago? I don’t know these folks, and never will. I don’t see it having anything to do with my everyday grind up here. Sorry for Mr. Nathaniel Woods, but the way I see it, he got caught up at the wrong place at the wrong time. End of argument.”

Bass shouts out, “Man you don’t have a clue if you really think that.”

“Law, it’s a systemic problem that has ripple effects all the way up here in Chicago,” Mrs. Brooks states. “Just think about it, while our Pledge of Allegiance states, ‘with liberty and justice for all,’ in many instances the justice system is set-up against you because of the skin you’re in. If you’re not educated, I didn’t say street smart – but educated, the system can entrap you either by getting you to do something uncivil to one of the ‘powers that be’ such as the police, or to someone in the same boat and skin as your own. But if you don’t see the bigger picture, the broader lesson, you’ll get caught right up in the cycle of it all…

“No, it might not be you against three white cops in Alabama. Yet your systemic challenge may be masked behind a hood of injustice that you simply see as your everyday hustle and grind. But think about what all you have to do to support that street hustle, all the people you may hurt, all the lives that get negatively impacted, and all the while, those you hurt look just like you. In that case, you don’t need three white officers holding guns against you. You’re the one holding the gun against yourself, literally and in theory.

“And by default, you’re also holding hostage a generation of young folks who feel the ripple effects of your hustle and grind mentality, which can cause someone innocent to lose a life. No, it may not be through a shot of lethal injection, but a shot from a drug needle, or worse yet an actual gun is just as deadly.”

 “I hear you, Teach. I just don’t agree. We all can make our own independent choices, and one has nothing to do with the other. We can’t make anybody do anything. Dude on his grind at the corner doesn’t hold a gun to anyone’s head saying, ‘You better buy these drugs, take these drugs, and be willing to die for these drugs. No. It doesn’t work like that. Your generation used to say, ‘every tub has to sit on its own bottom,’ right? So why now all of a sudden do you see it different?”

The bell rings just as I make my last statement. Round won. Debate closed.

“To be continued, Law,” Mrs. Brooks relents. “Class, read chapter 10 in your textbook for homework tonight. Be prepared to tell me how today’s discussion ties into your reading on the Civil Rights Movement and the tactics that were used to open the eyes of those who didn’t understand the issue of the day.”

I go through the rest of my day undisturbed. Two out of three afternoon classes ain’t bad, right? At least I even came. Who knows what Tré got into all day? I wish I did. I’m tired of not seeing any real money. I need it. I need a car so I’m not always depending on him or Bass to get me around. Besides, I’ve gotten used to getting around without the CTA. I’d probably go into shock or something if someone put me on a bus now. Plus, I’m the man of the house. It’s time I pull some real weight and start helping Mom with the bills. I had a little summer job moving grocery carts and stockpiles at the Jewel-Osco, but she wanted me to let it go to focus on getting my grades up this semester. Uncle John thought I should keep it to help me learn balance and responsibility. I didn’t want it either way. I only got it because Tré said I need to keep up good appearances so Mom don’t be breathing down his neck about how I suddenly had some money in my pocket. I don’t call the few Benjamin’s he’s throwing my way money when I know he makes five G’s easy in a week. But let him tell it, and that ain’t no money either. I’m just ready to be all-in on the game.

I head to my locker after gym to get my backpack and Civics book. I may flip through it to get some tips for my next debate with Mrs. Brooks. Bass should be coming this way any minute, which is perfect since I now need a ride home. Here’s my boy now, just in time.

“Law, you up? You wanna roll out?”

“Yeah, I roll with you.”

We walk out on the yard and a couple Freshies trying to act like they grown, low-key ask me for a nickel bag. I pull it out my hoodie pocket and make the quick exchange before the little security guard notices anything. Me and Bass walk across the yellow-green lawn that reflects the changing leaves and a school district that’s too cheap to water it. This campus is the same as when Mom was a student here. The only change is the visible wear and tear of the twenty years since then.

I slip into the passenger side of his silver Honda Civic. It’s not much, but at least I’m not walking home or to the bus stop.

“Where’s your cuz? I haven’t seen Tré all day.”

“Tré’s out there making his transition to the big leagues without me.”

“What you mean?”

“You know he’s got that pocket of 79th under his wing now. He’ll be a governor in a minute.”

“Straight? Cuz came up on his game like that? I knew he was building a reputation, but man.”

“Yeah. That’s why he hardly comes to school anymore. He’s out there making paper.”

“Are you hating?”

“I’m not hating on him, I’m just trying to get my piece of the block, too. He’s out there slinging rocks, while I’m still out here rolling trees on the schoolyard.

“He’s making the real money and pulling the real women. I’m tryin’ to pull one of those honeys like he’s got, but they not running to ride a bus with a broke brother when they got pimped out ride options like his Camry. He didn’t even have to steal his either, though he did get it from some chop shop on the West Side.”

“I don’t know, Law. I think I hear a little shade.”

“Naw, man. I just know I could easily go over west and go into business with one of the sets over there. But I’m trying to keep the business in the family.”

“What you could easily do is go over there and get somebody popped. I’m all for the come up and all, but you don’t know nothin’ about that K-Town life. So you need to leave it alone.”

“Who’s hating now?”

“I’m not hating. I just don’t want to see you get smoked over something you can easily avoid. That’s the Wild, Wild West for real over there. I think you should just wait it out. If Tré says he’s going put you on full-time, then he’ll be a man of his word.”

I heard Bass talking and all, but right now he sounds like another Charlie Brown teacher to me. I’ve got goals. I just need a plan. I’m thankful for the lift to the crib and all, but what I have in mind is bigger than his little hatchback-driving self and Tré’s ride put together. I’m gonna roll up on them in a Benz or Range Rover. Nah, bump that. I’m rolling up in a Maybach! I bet then I could pull any woman I wanted. I’ve had my little girlfriends and all, but I’m all about that life and who I pull up with validates the image. I want the whole package.

We make a quick stop by Fat Albert’s for pizza puffs and pops. Then off to the local record store for some throwback hip-hop. Bass wants to mix with at his next few gigs.

Flipping through the rows of wax makes me remember my childhood and all the albums Rogue used to play when me and John were just shorties. He and Mom would go dancing throughout the house like they were in love, like the world outside and all its sorrows couldn’t touch them. Man, that seems like a lifetime ago now. Like it was just a dream. Or better yet, all a lie.

Bass finds some Tupac and Biggie – being from the Midwest, we like them both. May they rest in peace. He drops cash on the counter and takes his change. The door chimes as another customer comes in and we step out back into the crisp fall air. I instinctually cuff my hood back on my head, smooth like, not to mess up my short afro twists.

Back in the hatchback, we spend the rest of the ride listening to the tracks bumping through his back speakers. Lil Wayne. 2 Chainz. Drake. Soon, we pull up in front of 3E.

“You coming through?”

“Not today. I’ve got to run my playlist for Friday night. The party ain’t right…”

“I know; I know…if the music ain’t tight.”

“Exactly.”

I grab my backpack and step out of the Civic onto the black asphalt where Bass is double-parked. I feel grounded in a familiar way outside my own domain. The burnt red bricks and the wrought iron first-floor windows dominate the corner lot. My key unlocks the wood framed glass door to enter what I imagine to be my own place someday, all tricked out like one of those MTV Cribs reruns. My penthouse awaits me in 3E. I take two stairs at a time to avoid Mr. Roundtree, who’s every other day asks the same thing, “Are you home alone?” and “Can you keep the music down?”

It’s my only real time alone, and today, I need some time to think of a plan. I need to get in the game for real. Tré’s got me on hold like I’m one of his dope fiends. There’s got to be another way.

I take off my Jordans and place them back in their Nike swoosh box, top shelf of my closet. I drop my hood and stretch out across the bed, scrolling through the text messages in my phone.

“Tré’s been blowing me up all day.”

I usually respond soon as I see his name pop up, but not today. I don’t like the way he talked to me like I’m some dumb mark or something. He needs to respect what I can bring to the table. I’m just as smart as he is, probably more. Let me see what his texts say.

“Law, hit me back. It’s important…

“Meet me at the crib on your way home…”

“I think I left something in your bag…”

Tré thinks he left something in my bag? I haven’t been in my bag all day other than to drop Mrs. Brooks’ Civics stuff in it. He used it earlier, but… Let me check inside.

I push my door to even though I was home alone out of force of habit. I check through the outside pockets first. Nothing but a pen, my charger, chewing gum, and a pack of Tops. On to the inside pouch. Let me take out this book and dump everything out.

“Damn. He left a bag of rocks.”

It’s got to be a good 5 ounces here, at least. He must have miscounted how many he had or either was moving around too fast in his trunk this morning and missed this one. Tré must be having a fit. He could probably make ten G’s off of this. Easy.

“Law, you home?” Sheila called out, laying down her keys and blue scrubs jacket at the door.

“Oh, shhh…”

“Law? Law!”

“What up, Mom?” Law emerges smoothly from behind the closed bedroom door.

“Boy, you got me thinking somebody was in here on me.”

“No, it’s just me. I must’ve dozed off for a minute.”

“Whew, today has been a day. Have you been home a while?”

“Yeah, a while. You’re home early.”

“A little bit. I just put my lunch hour on the back end of my day to run an errand. Then I ran into your Uncle John and he gave me a lift instead of me catching the bus. Wait, why am I running down my daily details to you? I’m the Mama. How was *your* day?”

“Oh, it was cool. Nothing out the ordinary. School, that’s all.”

“Did you make it to first-period class?”

Law conveniently inserts his earbuds and cranks up the volume just as the key question is posed.

“Law. Law? Did you hear me?”

Law heads over to the small galley kitchen, pretending to fumble with the pots.

“What’s for dinner, Mom?”

“What’s for dinner? I should be asking you that. You’re the one who beat me home.”

“Awe, come on now.”

“Oh, so now you can hear me talking to you. You think you’re slick. There’s some leftover beef stew from yesterday. I’ll whip up some cornbread and rice then call it a night.

“Come have a seat with me for a minute first,” Sheila said, pulling out a chair at the table. “I have some news that I need to run by you.”

 “Okay.”

“I got another collect call this morning after you left out for school.”

“From who, Rouge?”

“Who else would call me collect, Law? Yes. It was your Dad.”

“You know how I feel about that. I don’t see the need of giving him a title he’s not on the job to earn. He’s been locked up so long he doesn’t even know what I look like as a teenager.”

“I know, and that’s exactly why he called. He wants to see you, son.”

“See me for what? What can he say to me now?”

“I know you’ve missed him and that you feel he abandoned us, but Law, there’s nothing he can do about that now. He’s just trying to be a better example to you now than he was before. He thought he was doing something good for us. Heck, at the beginning I did, too. But we were both young and dumb. He got caught up in that gang and drug world, and before he knew it, it all caught up with him. He just wants to talk with you to apologize and make sure you don’t repeat his same mistakes.”

“Apologize? What’s the sense of an apology that doesn’t change anything? ‘I’m sorry’ ain’t gonna bring him home when he got 25 to life. ‘Sorry son’ ain’t gonna put no extra money in our pockets or shoes on my feet. Rogue was dumb and weak, and he got what comes to dumb and weak mo’s just like him.”

“No! He got what comes to dumb and weak seventeen-year-old boys who think they know everything, only to grow up and see they knew absolutely nothing! He’s trying to help you avoid his mistakes, Law. He’s far from perfect, but you should at least hear him out. You’ve got to!”

“I don’t have to do nothing!”

“What, boy!”

“You go see him and do what you want. You told me, you promised me, that when I turned 13 you would leave it up to me whether I visited him anymore. That was the same year we loss John. I decided then, I was done with Rogue. He ain’t never done nothing for me or us. He wasn’t even at Lil’ John’s funeral. Who was there holding your hand and wiping your tears that day and any day since then? It was me, Mama. It’s been me. So I’m done with him. I hate him!”

“Law. Law, don’t you walk away from me! Come back here, boy! Why are you putting on your shoes? Where do you think you’re going?”

“Move, Ma.”

“Move! Who are you telling to move?”

“Please move!”

“Law! Law… Don’t push pass me!”

“Stop pulling on my bag, Ma. Please move.”

“Lawrence Trenton Davis!”

I don’t want to push my Mom. I promised after I saw Rogue strike her that time that no one would ever put a hand on her, not even me. Instead I slide by her and bolt straight for the door. I’ve got to get out of here. I feel like the walls are sucking the life out of me. How am I supposed to put on a dog and pony show for some fool who wasn’t smart enough not to get caught. And if he did, he wasn’t even smart enough to set his family up right for while he was gone. We’re just out here, by ourselves. Mom ain’t had nothing easy. Nothing.

We were in and out of here friends’ homes and even stayed some nights in a shelter ‘cause she had too much pride to just go back home. She was so sure he was a good guy. She stood by him until she just couldn’t no more. And where did all that get her? Divorced and alone with two boys to raise alone, now one of them is gone. I wish I knew who did it. I wish I was in the game back then. I would’ve handled my business! I was just a shorty, but not anymore. I’ve got to make life happen for me and on my own terms.

I run down the three flights of stairs into the now dusk air. Desperate times call for desperate measures. I’m headed to bus stop…79th Street to Ashland. Ashland to the ‘L.’ Green Line train to the West Side.

**Chapter 3 ~ Warning Shots**

“Hello, Tré?”

“Yeah?”

“It’s Cousin Sheila.”

“Hey Cuz.”

“Have you talked to Law this evening? We had words and he just stormed out of here. I was trying to give him some time to cool off, but he never came back for dinner and now it’s after 10 o’clock.”

“Oh wow. Well, I haven’t seen him since I dropped him off at school this morning. I sent him a few texts earlier ‘cause I was looking for him myself, but he didn’t answer yet. You know how hotheaded he can be sometimes. I’m sure he’ll turn up soon, deep down, he really is a Mama’s boy, you know.”

“I know.”

“He’s getting older now. He can handle himself a bit. Give him tonight to walk it off, and I’ll come through there in the morning. If he’s not there then, I’ll help you find him.”

“I guess. A lot can happen on the streets out there alone, though. I don’t know that I just want to sit here doing nothing all night.”

“Just give him some space tonight. I’m sure he’ll turn up by the morning.”

“I sure hope so. I’ve seen him mad before, but not like that.”

“Don’t mean to step into your business, but you did call me. What’s he so mad about anyway?”

“I told him that Rogue wants him to visit. He wants to talk to him before his birthday, but Law wasn’t trying to hear none of that. He just snapped.”

“I can see that happening. He’s got this love hate thing that runs deep with Rogue.”

“Well, I don’t know about the love anymore because he told me tonight that he flat out that he hates him.”

“I can get that. At least he knows who he’s hating on and where to find him. I’m hating on a man I don’t remember ever seeing a day in my life.”

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t be burdening you with all of my parenting worries. Just let me know if he calls or reaches out. Can you do that for me, Tré?”

“For sho’. I’ll still roll through in the morning, though.”

“Thanks, Tré. Goodnight.”

Shelia hangs up and finally realizes she’s been pacing the floor the entire call. She takes a warm shower to calm her nerves and opens up the let-out couch in the living room. She could only afford a one-bedroom apartment when she and Law moved to 3E for a fresh start after losing Lil’ John. It wasn’t the greatest neighborhood, but at least they didn’t have to walk pass the corner where he was gunned down every time they walked out the door. She decided then that instead of stretching herself for the extra bedroom or moving in with family, she would tough it out for a season. She felt that as a then 13-year-old, Law need some sense of privacy, and perhaps a personal space to sort through all of his pain. She hoped that in some way giving him the bedroom showed how much he was loved and cherished. As she nestled under the covers, turned on the TV, she hoped he could still feel how much he was loved and return to their home again.

It didn’t take me no time to set up shop. I hopped off the Green Line ‘L’ near Pulaski Road and Lake Street and walked a couple blocks out of view of streetlights and CPD cameras. I scoped the next couple of blocks for strategically parked cars or random mo’s on corners. Check and check. The cost was clear, at least clear enough for me to dump this gold right quick and get out of dodge. I wasn’t out there a good 20 minutes before one hype walked by me. All I had to say was, “$20 or $50” to indicate the volume and price of what I had available. Before I know it, dude goes ruffling through his pockets and pulls out $50. Within an hour or two I was at $250. By almost midnight I was sold out and had nearly a G in my pocket. In just one night, I made more than that hand-to-mouth chump change Tré ties to throw my way. What he’s really throwing me are his leftovers. But this, this is where it’s at! Now, I’ve just got to figure out how to get my own supplier, come back here and do it all again. Man, it I could have a night like this once a week, I’d have enough to help Mom and buy my own ride.

I got to be smart, though. I’m going buy myself something nice with some of this, then save the rest. If I save this, and still do the little side hustle stuff with Tré, I’ll eventually have enough to connect with my own people and push my own product. Maybe in a year I’ll have enough flowing through to hire a couple peons like Tré’s trying to make me out to be. I got him, though. This time next year, I’m gonna be the one riding through with the honey and the soupped up rims. He’ll be looking up to me then.

Time to head back to the ‘L’ stop…Green Line train to Ashland. Ashland to 79th Street. 79th Street to the South Side.

Good. She’s still sleep and hasn’t gotten up yet for work. I can tell her I came in at midnight and she’ll never know the difference. She can never stay awake that late. She won’t understand what I had to do, so I’ll just say I needed to clear my head and went to Tré’s crib. No. Don’t say that. She has his number and his mom’s. She would have called there first. I’ll say, I went to stay with Bass and his people. That way, none will be the wiser.

“Law,” Sheila said, half relieved as she spotted him stretched across his bedroom floor. His kicks were on the floor, a signal that he still wasn’t quite himself. “Law. Wake up.”

“Uhh…hey.”

“Hey yourself… What was all of that about last night?”

“All of what, Mom. We haven’t even said good morning yet and you’re starting in on me.”

“I was up for what felt like half the night worried sick about you and you’re looking for a good morning from me. You’re lucky that I’m even trying to have a conversation with you at all. Why did you leave out of here last night and where did you go?”

“Mom. I needed to get some air and clear my head.”

“Really? Where did all that fresh air take you? I called Tré looking for you, and he said he hadn’t talked to you since yesterday morning.”

“He doesn’t know my every move.”

“Since when? You act like you’re his built-in shadow most days. What’s so different now? Where were you, Law?

“You’re not grown. You don’t get to just storm out of my house without permission or an explanation. That’s not how this home flows, and you know that.”

“I know a lot of stuff. It just doesn’t make sense anymore. And if it don’t make sense, what’s the sense of doing it?”

“Because I’m your mother and I said so. That’s the sense it makes!

“You’re just sixteen. Hardly anything you do makes sense. That’s why you’re still with me. That’s why I’m still looking after you, busting my butt at work every day to take care of you. The least you can do is respect my house and hear me out when I’m speaking to you, whether you like what I have to say or not!”

“I wasn’t trying to disrespect your house.”

“Oh, so you were just trying to disrespect *me* then, huh?”

“I didn’t mean it that way.”

“That’s exactly what you meant because that’s exactly how you made me feel. Why else would you ignore what I said to you and walk out? I know your father hasn’t been everything you’ve needed along the way, especially these past few years that he’s been away. But the very reason he’s in prison now, is the exact reason why you need to listen to him.

“He’s far from perfect. Trust me, I know that far better than you. Yet he has some things to share with you that will make a huge difference in the direction your life is heading. I don’t want to see you end up on the same path that Bill chose, and neither does he. All I’m asking you to do is to see him this one last time. After that, you can choose to never see him again.”

“Are you making me a promise?”

“I don’t have to but I will. I promise. Do *you* promise to try?”

 “Then I’ll think about it.”

Tré’s music once again vibrates the apartment’s wood trimmed windows then suddenly, silence. Seconds later the doorbell buzzes for 3E.

“Hello?”

“Hey Cousin Sheila. It’s Tré.”

“Come on up,” Sheila said as she buzzes access through the downstairs glass door.”

“Mom, what are you doing?”

“What do you mean, what am I doing? I just let in Tré. I told you I called him last night looking for

you. He promised to stop by this morning to check-in on you. Now that’s what a promise looks

like.”

“I don’t need him checking on me,” Law said, half annoyed and half petrified. “I’m not some kid.”

“Well then stop acting like it. Kids throw temper tantrums and storm out of their mother’s presence. Now open up the door and let him in. You hear him knocking. Open the door. Open the door, Law!”

I feel like my guts are about to hit the floor. I gotta play this off. He won’t know anything that I don’t tell him, at least not for sure. I just have to deny anything he asks me and stay calm. Just stay calm. Breathe, fool. Breathe.

“Hey, what’s up?”

“What’s up? You tell me…

“Hey Cousin Sheila.”

“Well if it isn’t Terrance Avery, III.”

“In the flesh.”

“Thanks for stopping by, but as you can see, the prodigal son has returned.”

“No problem. I’m sorry I couldn’t be of more help before, but some folks don’t know how to pick up their phones.”

“Why ya’ll talking about me like I’m not standing right here?”

“I’m talking about you however I want to in my own house.”

“And I’m talking about you like you’re some ghost, ‘cause that’s how you’ve been acting with your disappearing acts,” Tré said.

“I’m going to leave you two to talk while I finish getting ready for work. Try talking to him, Tré,” Sheila whispers on her way out of the living room.

Avoid eye contact without being obvious, Law. I keep trying to talk myself down from freaking out. I once saw pop one mug right in front of me for shortchanging him 10 Gs on some crack rock. He said he had to make an example of him, set a precedent, so nobody else would even think of doing that to him again. I wouldn’t usually think anything of it because I’m his cousin, but that mo-fo I watched him pop was once his ride or die. I guess the latter of the two prevailed.

I know what… Let me make up Mom’s bed. That will buy me some time. Take off the pillows, one by one. Pull off the comforter and place it in the basket beside the smoked glass end table. Neatly tuck in the sheets. Now lift the base frame of the sofa bed and…

“Negro, when the hell did you become Martha Stewart?”

“What do you mean?”

“In all the years ya’ll done lived here, I can count the times on one hand that you made your own bed let alone your mom’s.

“Where have you been?”

“What you mean, where I been?”

“Just what I said. I was blowing you up yesterday and you never responded. Not once. What’s that all about? I know you got my text. My phone told me you opened it. So what’s up with ghosting me and all?”

“I wasn’t ghosting you. Like I told Mom, I had to clear my head after she came at me talking about Rogue and all.”

“I don’t give a damn about that. You know exactly what I mean. Where’s your backpack? Better yet, where’s my shh…”

“Hold up, right there You ain’t gotta come at me like that. It sounds like you’re trying to accuse me of something and I don’t know what you’re talking about, Tré.”

“You know exactly what I’m talking about. I left a package in your bag and I want it back.”

“You ain’t leave nothing in my bag.”

“That was the last place it was and the only place it could be. So how you gonna tell me that it’s not in your possession?”

“Just like this. It’s not in my possession. You think you 5-0 now? Did Chicago’s Finest swear you in as an honorary officer and I missed the invitation?”

“Watch yourself, Law. I promise you that you should watch yourself. Where’s your bag?”

“I don’t have to show you nothing.”

“Don’t make me ask you twice.”

I’ve been around Tré enough to know when enough was enough. Okay, I’ll show it to him. It doesn’t matter anyway now.

“Come on,” Law said, dropping the last sofa pillow in its place and heading back into his room. “Here it is, look for yourself.”

“I will,” Tré said, opening each zipper and turning the bag inside out.

“Now hold up. I didn’t give you permission to start going through my drawers, too. You just took it too far…

“Get out of my closet! Get out. Get out!”

“Law, I swear on my Mama, I bet’ not find out that you had it. See, you’re too thirsty man. Thirsty for everything in every way.”

“I’m not thirsty.”

“The hell you ain’t. You’re so thirsty that you don’t even think. You don’t think about the fallout of your own ambitions. So naïve, you think that everything happens in its own little container and no thing is related to the other. That’s not how life goes. Every action has a reaction. Every cause has an effect. And if you’re lying to me now, it’s gonna show later.”

“I’m not lying to you, Tré.”

“You better not be…

“Now, I’ve got to come out my pocket to give my supplier back his cut from that product. You bet’ not be lying.”

“Naw, man. I told you, I’m not somebody’s kid.”

“Boy please, you still live at home with your mama and get rides to school from me.”

“That don’t mean I’m a kid. I’m just Gucci.”

“Get dressed.”

Whew. Crisis avoided. I thought he was…I don’t know what I thought was about to happen. All I do know is that I’m glad it didn’t. I think this whole scenario would have played out differently if Mom wasn’t home. I probably would’ve had some broken ribs by now. Instead I’m riding shotgun again with Tré, only this time though in silence. He hasn’t even turned on his radio. I can count the times I’ve seen him this quiet, and each time was because he was so deep in thought that he was trying to figure his way back out again.

I guess I should feel guilty or something, but the way I see it, what’s a grand between blood. He’s probably got that much and more hidden underneath his mattress at home. I figure that if he was really thinking clearly, he would’ve given me that bag to sale in the first place. He would’ve have willingly given me a chance to prove myself rather than forcing me to take it. Now, because of his selfishness, I had to make up my own rules and play my own game. Either way, he’ll be alright in the end. All I have to do now is get my hands on more product without him knowing it.

I mentally skipped the first half of my day. I only showed up because Tré made me come. I’m here in the flesh, but I’m trying to figure out how soon I can get back to Pulaski and Lake. More than that, how do I get over there and not go empty handed? I don’t think I’ve focused on anything a teacher has said today. School is just a placeholder for now until I can figure out my next move. I’ve gotta figure out my hustle the right way. I don’t want to be out there janky like some dumb mark on the street. I’ve got to get my business plan straight, scope out some runners, the whole deal.

The only teacher to hold my attention is Mrs. Brooks. Didn’t do her homework, of course, but I did scan through the photo captions and timelines in the chapter. I can’t go in there totally unprepared to state my case.

“Good afternoon, class. Take out your textbooks and turn to chapter ten. What were some of the key topics covered in your reading? It doesn’t have to be in any particular order, just share what stood out to you.”

“Mrs. Brooks, I remember reading about how the Jim Crow laws legalized segregation of whites and blacks even through the 1960s. Like, separate water fountains. Separate public restrooms, public transportation, and schools,” one student said. “My grandma was born in the 1960s.”

“That’s a very key point. And knowing someone who was born during that time helps bring it home a bit more for us all... What else did we read?”

“I saw that they got away with the Jim Crow laws based on some court case called Plessy versus somebody,” another student recalled.

“Yes, and to be exact that was Plessy v. Ferguson. It was significant because it was a ruling by the U.S. Supreme Court, which decided that racial segregation did not violate the U.S. Constitution as long as the facilities provided for blacks were what so called equal in quality to those offered to whites. This court case, and the Jim Crow laws, were connected by a concept called, separate but equal. Yet, what was separate was never equal. Blacks received subpar versions of everything, and were still treated as second class citizens striped of their civil rights.

“Ultimately, a U.S. Supreme Court ruling from Plessy v. Ferguson in 1896 was used as the precedent to uphold the desire to again treat us a second class citizens nearly seventy years later in the 1960s. Matter of fact, it wasn’t until Brown v. Board of Education in 1954, the civil rights movement, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 that some of these things began to change.

“So then, who can tell me one of the key connecting factors between last night’s reading and the open letter we discussed yesterday from Martin Luther King, III? How about you, Law? You’ve been surprisingly quiet today. Did you complete the reading assignment?”

“Dang Mrs. Brooks, why you got to put me on blast like that in front of the class?”

“Mr. Davis, you’re too quick on your feet to ever be put on blast.”

“You know that’s right!”

“Settle down class, settle down… So Law, what is a common factor between the two?”

“For one thing, both were talking about black people.”

“That’s stating the obvious. Go deeper than that.”

“Well, while I really don’t see how it makes a difference, I think a big connecting factor was that they both impacted situations that mostly happened in the South.”

“You’re exactly right.

“While civil liberties were withheld from blacks in the North and in the South, at least there was a historic record of the northern states being more accepting of blacks having some level of freedoms. We see this play out from the Civil War being fought between the Union in the North and the Confederacy in the South, to the Great Migration of blacks from the South to the North for better jobs and opportunities for their families.”

“But what good did all that do? We got pass their so called separate but equal state, but within our own community everything is separate and nothing is equal. It’s still a dog-eat-dog world where I come from. You either eat or get eaten, and I don’t like being hungry, Mrs. Brooks.”

“Expound on that some more.”

“What I’m saying is, everyone wants to live a better life. Everybody wants to make more money. But in my world, my competition ain’t white. My competition looks just like me.”

“But could it be Mr. Davis, that we as blacks have been withheld from our civil liberties in one way or another so long until by the time your generation came along, we forgot who started the unrest in the first place? Could it be that the world became so small to us that we no longer say who our true competition, as you call it, really was in all of this?

“Class, could it be that we’ve been so mentally drained of our genius that we’ve now come to mistaken our brother as our enemy? I think in the military they call that friendly fire.”

“That’s all well and good, Mrs. Brooks, but ain’t no white people in my circle of ‘brothers.’ They don’t go to my school, and they sho’ ain’t living in my community. So I don’t see whites as my enemy. My enemy looks just like me.”

“I don’t want you to see white people as your enemy. That’s not the answer either. Martin Luther King, III’s father, Dr. King, never wanted that for any of us. He said, ‘I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.’ Yet at the same time, I believe in my heart that he wasn’t asking us to be colorblind either. He wanted each race to live together in harmony where we all feel valued for our creative differences, while at the same time loving those who share our same commonalities. I don’t think your position safely achieves that premise.”

“Mrs. Brooks, now there you go with them new words again.”

“A premise, Law, is a theory of logic. It’s the reason behind why we do what we do. Just like the premise of this class is to teach each of you civics, or the rights and duties of citizens. Yet, to do that correctly, as a teacher I must ensure that you understand what makes you a citizen. Citizenship is about more than your legal place of birth, residency, or any laws. It’s about being engaged in the humanity of people, all people. It’s about realizing that our existence is interconnected.

“We’ll continue our discussion on tomorrow, class. Be ready to discuss the second half of this chapter and a possible pop quiz before the end of the week.”

There she goes again with all that Kum Ba Yah mess. Sometimes I think Mrs. Brooks lives in a bubble. I like debating with her and all, but I think she’s in a land of make believe. All that stuff she’s talking about, that’s not my reality. Ain’t no white man taking nothing from me, ‘cause ain’t no white man ever gave nothing to me. I don’t know nothing about their world, and they don’t know nothing about mine. The only thing that’s separate but equal for me is this hustle I’m trying to figure out to make some paper. I’m trying to figure out a separate way to make equal money! All the rest of that is a bunch of bull. I don’t see it; I don’t live it; so I don’t buy it. That’s it, that’s all. Case closed.

I pop into Mrs. Brooks class a couple more times in the week, strategically missing her pop quiz. There was no need to add insult to injury by getting an F on top of everything else this week. I’ll make it up later. I just need to hang with my boys for a few and chill. Relax and enjoy this weather. It’s nothing like a surprising 75-degree day in late September. We got one last taste of summer left before The Hawk comes our way. Nothing like a Chicago winter, especially by the lakefront.

Tré scooped me and a couple of his boys for a ride to enjoy the weather on a Friday afternoon. It was sunny. Warm enough for T-shirts with no jackets, but I always have on a hoodie. Tré drops us off at this dude Craig’s house over east. He runs the South Shore set for Tré’s supplier, while Tré holds it down in Englewood. I’m still trying to talk him into giving me a piece of the pie, but while he’s dragging his feet, I’m still thinking of a way to get back to the West Side and do something on my own. After I get out, he and Craig run an errand and come back with some food just as it had gotten dark.

“Craig, how you gonna come back here with some Harold’s smelling like that and not even offer me none?”

“Who said that?” Craig asked, while taking a seat on the second from the top step.

“My lil’ cuz, Law,” Tré replied, settling on the step just beneath him.

“Law? Nigger, get your black ass off my porch. Did you give me some money for some chicken?”

“Aw hecky naw you crazy, Craig,” Law said, laughing.

“He got you right there, man,” Tré chimed in laughing, too.

“Law *is* the chicken. That’s why his butt is sitting up there on the top stoop, perched like some bird ready to fly away!”

“You ain’t right.”

I was laugh but still trying to man up. I don’t want them thinking he got me – although he did, because I am sitting higher up on the arm of the porch. I don’t know why, it just happened that way. I was talking with Craig’s boys while he and Tré were gone, sharing a forty, and that’s just where I ended up.

In between our laughs, of which I seem to take the brunt of, Tré hands me a wing with mild sauce and black pepper. We all talk a while about a lot of nothing. There’s a party Saturday night at Tré’s girl’s house and we all plan to roll through. Most of us are just chillin.’ Craig on the other hand is playing his own version of “that’s my car,” the same game I played while keeping watch for Tré earlier in the week. Only this time, his version of the game is out loud.

“Red car. Blue car. Green car.”

“There you go again counting cars, Craig,” Tré said.

“I can’t help it man. After you’ve been marked as many times as I have, it becomes a habit…

“That blue car sure looked like that fool Jody’s from the West Side, though. You know he got those custom double-spin rims everyone wants.”

“Man, you trippin’. Why would West Side Jody be all the way over here. Everybody South of Lake Street knows he’s got that area on lock,” Tré said.

“Hmm… Red car. Blue car. Green car… Go! Go! Go!”

Craig is screaming at the top of his lungs. He takes off running towards me and the others at the top of the porch. All I can see is a dark car. It’s all in slow motion for mw, but at the same time I can’t focus. My mind feels stuck and for a minute so do my feet. I see random beams of fire coming from the passenger side windows. Both windows are down and all I can see is fire. Craig pushes me to turn around. The touch of his hand on my shoulder makes me know that this is not a dream. I wake up in reality and somehow my feet start to move, too. The door is still unlocked and we all scramble inside the living room some falling onto the floor.

Some keep running in front of me because now the fire lines are coming through the picture glass window that’s now cracking like a dozen ice trays all at once. I keep running forward, forward to the end of the house, out the back door, and down the wooden patio and flight of steps. My heart is racing and I can’t feel my legs. My chest is so tight it feels like I ran into a wall of needles. I don’t know what else to do but follow the random guy in front of me who’s car is parked in the back yard. He cranks it up and drives off with two of us in tow. A block away, I realize that I’m bleeding. A block away, I realize that neither one of the others is Craig or Tré.

By the time I announce I’m bleeding, the guy driving drops me off at the nearest ER. I’m there alone. I don’t know what to say or not to say. I don’t know what to do.

“Young man, what is your name and date of birth?”

“Law. Um… I mean, Lawrence Trenton Davis. March 27, 2005.”

“Oh then you’re still a minor. Who’s your immediate contact’s information?”

“Um…my Mom, Sheila Boyd Davis, 312-428…”

It only took Mom an hour to get here. Uncle John, a man of few words, left work early to drive her up here when she got the call that I was shot. He’s in the ER waiting room. I’m sure he’ll have plenty to say tonight. The doctor is releasing me to go home. He said I’m fortunate that I only had a deep graze wound to my left thigh. He also said, “An inch or two to the right, and the bullet would’ve hit an artery. You could have bled out on the way to the hospital.”

I still don’t know where Tré ended up yet. It all happened so fast.

The doctor patches me up and gives me my choice of a cane or crutches to ease the pressure on my leg. I choose the crutches. I’m not walking around like some old man.

Mom hasn’t said anything. She goes from sitting and staring at me to not wanting to look at me at all. I’ve never seen her like this. Mama’s brown skin and stout curvy frame always seemed so strong to me. Not so much right now. I think she’s scared. We start walking down the hall towards the exit when I notice an open curtain to one of the ER bays. It’s Craig. I step inside as Mom stands dazed several feet away from his bed.

“Hey Craig. I didn’t know what happened to you and Tré. Are you good, man?”

“I’m straight. Or I will be when they let me out of here.”

“Where’d they get you, man?”

“In my back, just above my kidney. But it was a clean shot though. Through and through, exit wound and all. I have to go up for a little surgery, but I’m stable.”

“What even happened back there?”

“Man, them mo’s tried to make me a mark before and fail every time. I learned my lessons when I was new in the game. I took some hard knocks.”

“Yeah, man?”

“Yeah. I’ve already been shot eleven times before this. This ain’t nothing. They can’t take me out before it’s time. I’m damn near Super Man. Bullets bounce right off me, man.”

Sheila finally breaks her silence, steps forward and said, “I heard your name is Craig. What actually happened?”

“Me and Tré had just got back from Harold’s. I had just sat down on the step and tore the bag open. Got settled in good, too.”

“You were about to tear into those six wings you kept fronting me over,” Law said jokingly, hoping to lighten the impact of what his mother was about to hear.

“Bro, you know it. Fried hard with salt and pepper. I had only taken one bite, just one, when all of a sudden I noticed this car slowly circling the block a second time.”

“That black sedan that usually rolls over West, right?”

“Yeah that one, with the custom rims. Anyway, by the time dude circled back the second time, they opened fire on us. Everyone on the porch ran for the door. Law was one of the first ones in the crib ‘cause he was the closest, but I had to push him in. It was like you were a deer in headlights, man. Anyway, then me. I saw Tré turn to come in right after me. I made it into the hallway. I turned back for Tré only to see him cross the threshold behind me. I know he made it into the doorway, but he collapsed looking lifeless on the floor.

“I know if I got hit once, he had to have taken at least two or three rounds. I still don’t know if he made it or not. Law, can you find out?”

I can’t feel my legs…

**Chapter 4 ~ Far from the Tree**

My mind is racing. I don’t think I’ve ever thought this fast. My heart is pounding. I need to know what happened, but at the same time I’m too scared to find out. I don’t even know who to call to find out. The only people I really know who were there tonight are Craig and Tré. Craig’s laying here on this bed right in front of me, present and accounted for. Tré… I don’t know what to do.

“Excuse me, nurse. Nurse,” Sheila asks at the ER station. “Can you tell me if a young man by the name of Terrance Avery, III was brought into this ER?”

“Ma’am, I’m really not supposed to share that information.”

“Well he’s my cousin, and he may have been shot along with my son and that young man laying on the gurney over there. If he’s here, I know how to reach his mother. I don’t think she would know he was even here.”

“Hmm… Let me see what I can do. I’ll look through our database.

“I see here that a young male by that name was brought in about two hours ago.”

“Okay, can you tell me if he’s alright? Can we go in to see him?”

“Um, ma’am, you said you know how to reach his next of kin, right?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Our administrative team has been working with the police to get in touch with the number on file, but there’s been no answer.”

“It’s probably because his mother works nights. Or unfortunately, maybe her phone is off again. I have a work number for her. Should I try that? What should I tell her?”

“Can you just share the phone number with me, ma’am?”

“Okay, but what happened to him?”

“Ma’am…the number please.”

“Um, sure.”

“What’s wrong, Mom? Is he okay?”

“I don’t know, Law. She can’t tell me because I’m not his next of kin.”

“Next of kin? That doesn’t sound good.”

“Let’s not rush to conclusions, Law. The same would be said to Tré’s mother if things were unfortunately the other way around. They’ve got HIPPA Laws to protect his medical privacy. I’m sure that’s all that’s going on.”

“Are you sure?”

“Let’s pray so.”

It took the nurse about thirty minutes to actually reach Tré’s mother and get her from her Amazon work post to the phone. The nurse was discreet, but did not shy away from her phone call so that Sheila could receive the critical information by default of being within ear range.

“Hello. Are you the mother of Terrance Avery, III?” She asked calmly.

“Ma’am, it appears that your son was brought by ambulance to our ER with multiple gunshot wounds. I regret to inform you that after exhaustive life-saving efforts, he has succumbed to his injuries. Are you able to come to our morgue to identify his body?”

I can hear her screams through the phone. It’s so loud that the nurse pulls the phone away from her ear and holds it to her chest, trying to hold her professional composure. After what feels like forever, the nurse confirms the hospital address and then hangs up the phone.

Just like that. It’s over, just like that? How can it be said and done just like that? I don’t understand.

“Wait. Wait! Wait, what? What did you just say? Wait! What did you just say!” Law, shouted, while throwing one crutch towards the nurse. “Wait, what!”

“Law, calm down son! Please calm down,” Sheila said, trying to pull him back from the nurse’s station.

“You can’t just say something like that! She can’t just say that!”

Law lets out a scream that alarms the entire floor. “No! Nooo!

“I can’t breathe. Mama, I can’t breathe.”

“Son! Son! Come here! Let’s go sit down in the hall. Come on.

“No, security guards, please. Ma’am, I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. I’ve got him.

“Come on, son. I’ve got you.”

I hobble out on one crutch to the lobby. Uncle John stands when he sees me coming through the automatic double doors. I walk far enough just to collapse into his arms. I don’t realize that I’m crying from my eyes and nose until we sit down. All I can do is grab my head with both hands and hold on as tight as I can, hoping it won’t explode. I can’t contain any more of the pressure. It’s all too much for me. Mom sits down beside us and starts to rock me. I feel like I did the night we lost my brother. I feel like I’m thirteen all over again. I can’t seem to gather myself. The pieces of who I know myself to be are all on the ground now. Tré’s gone.

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It’s been nearly two weeks, and still no funeral plans. Tré’s mom didn’t have life insurance on him through her job, only medical. Some of the guys around the hood are chipping in to cover the expenses. But I can’t even do that. I don’t have my money right yet. Craig and em’ already talking about rolling up on West Side Jody. It’s only a matter of time. We’re only waiting out of respect for Tré’s mom, giving her a chance to bury him before there’s any more bloodshed and all. I’m rolling on this one. I’ve got to. Tré wasn’t just my boy. We were blood.

“Law, you’ve been awfully quiet son. What’s going on in that head of yours? Please talk to me.”

“There’s nothing left to say, Mama.”

“There’s plenty left to say, like how you feel and what you’re thinking. You’ve barely said a word to me about Tré since all of this happened.”

“That’s because there’s nothing left to say.”

“Why do you keep saying that?”

“Because the matter is already handled and there’s nothing else to say about it.”

“What does that mean, Law? Law…let the police handle this. You stay out of it.”

“The police don’t care about Tré. We’re our own police out here, Mama.”

“Where are you getting all this from, Law? I wasn’t a perfect mother. I know that full well. I also know your father wasn’t always the best example, but we tried our best, Law. We’re still trying. You don’t have to go this way. You just don’t.

“That’s it. I’m calling your Uncle John over. Maybe he can talk some sense into you.”

It seems like Uncle John just appears out of thin air. I can go months without seeing him, but then without hardly a notice he will pop up either right on time or in time to catch me up in something wrong. I can hear the door of his Cadillac close shut. That old school steel just sounds different, heavier than the other cars. The door buzzer signals round two with these so called adults, so convinced that they have to convince me that I’m wrong. I get tired of it all. Within minutes I hear his worn out work boots shuffling up the steps to 3E. He’s wearing a set of blue Dickies coveralls, and from the look of the stains has either been working on somebody’s car or painting houses. He’s never not working on something or for someone. Always working too hard. Stringing money together trying to make it stretch. He ain’t no simp, though, I’ve known him to take a few conversations outside. But I can’t let him see that.

Shelia opens the apartment door, greeting John with only a nod. “Law’s in his bedroom.”

Unannounced, John steps through the half-cracked bedroom door.

“I really don’t feel like talking, Uncle John,” Law said, reorganizing his gym shoe row on his closet floor.

“Then that’s perfect, because I do. So that means you can just listen. Have a seat… I said, sit down,” John said sternly, without a smile or a greeting, and taking his six-foot tall stance in the center of the floor.

“Now, I didn’t say nothing to you the night your cousin died. I could tell how messed up you were about it all. But you’ve got your Mama a nervous wreck, and none of this is fair to her.

“Your Mom’s already been telling me that you’ve been skipping class and hanging out with the wrong crowd, and you see where that’s got them. One spent a night in an ER room and the other on a slab in a morgue.

“Now I’m not one for pulling punches, never have been. So I’m gonna tell it like it is, either you get your act together or you’re getting up out of here. ‘Cause if you want to act like you all hard like a man, then be a man. Real men carry their own weight with real jobs and real responsibilities. Real men have their own roof on their heads, not the one their Mama provides for them. And I’m not talking with some weed head crumb snatching street corner job. I’m talking about a real job where you work hard and get an honest pay check.

“Until you start pulling that kind of weight around here or get your own keys and bricks, you’ll abide by her rules. No more storming out of here and staying out until only God knows when either. Sheila’s doing the best she can by you, but you need some undertaking by men now. Speaking of which, you’ve taken long enough to decide about seeing your Pops. You need to hear what he has to say to you, and if you plan on staying in this house any longer, you will.

“I’ve already made arrangements. I’ll pick you up tomorrow at 7 a.m. so we can beat some of the traffic to Dixon.”

“But tomorrow’s a school day.”

“Since when do you care about having perfect attendance? Tomorrow is the day we’re approved to go, and tomorrow it will be. And you better be here and ready when I get here. Sheila gives you too many choices. You don’t have one no more. Leave out of here tonight, and see what happens to ya’.”

“Whatever.”

“Whatever? Boy, I will beat you like the man you think you are. Do you understand me?”

“Yeah.”

“Be ready at 7 a.m.”

He never did military time, but he’s always on time like he did. He scoops me up, stops by Dunkin’ for a couple donuts and coffee for himself, then tears into the highway. We don’t say much for the two hours out there. There’s not much else to say. I’m busy trying to remember what Rogue looked like the last time I saw him. Would he sound the same? I’ve probably changed the most. Part of me doesn’t want any part of this. The other part is ready to final get it over so I can move on with my life and be rid of him for good. I hope whatever he has to say finally squashes it, all of it. I don’t need him no more. What good can he be to me now?

We drive to the security guard booth. One officer stays inside. Two officers come check the car, one with a mirror and the other with a dog sniffing around the undercarriage of Uncle John’s Caddy. We pass that check point and are directed on where to park.

Steel doors buzz and let us inside a long stale grey hallway, then shut behind us. I can see them watching us on the overhead surveillance cameras. Another security booth. Uncle John gives our names, dates of birth, then Dad’s, “Bill Davis.” A metal detector, pat down, and another steel door buzzer later, we find ourselves in a holding area waiting. Uncle John waits until now to say he’s not going back there with me, said, “Here’s the first true test of your manhood. You need to face your father alone. The good and the bad of him.”

I’m directed to sit down at a phone behind a wall of glass. I will not touch him. He will not touch me. He’s on display like a museum exhibit from some childhood era gone by, or worse, like an animal at a zoo but once free and wild. Rogue walks in here wearing the orange version of Uncle John’s uniform, looking all shell shocked and empty. He stands 6’ 1” but he seems much smaller to me now. He used to look like a giant. He reaches for the phone on his side. I reach for mine.

“Hey, son.”

“Hey.”

“Man, you’re so big now. Stand up. Let me look at you. Wow, man, what are you now about 5’ 11”? Man time flies.”

“When you’re having fun?” Law said sarcastically.

“No, this isn’t fun. Doing time is the hardest thing I’ve ever done.”

“Harder than leaving me and Mom to fend for ourselves?”

“That’s why it’s hard, Law. I can live with the consequences for myself. What hurts is the way it impacts the two of you. You guys didn’t ask for this. Didn’t ask for none of it.”

“So why did you give it to us then?”

“That’s a fair question.

“I thought I was doing the right thing. I was young. We needed money. Flipping burgers wasn’t gonna cut it. I was too ambitious for that. I just wasn’t smart about it. I got in the drug game and made some decent money at first. I was only doing it on the side from time to time. Then the money got good, and the whole game drew me in so fast and quick that I couldn’t keep up.”

“Sounds like you weren’t on your game to me.”

“You can think what you want, but this drug game has a mind of its own. As smart as I thought I was, that wasn’t the heart of who I was, but I let it change me. The years went by and I got more consumed with the money. I always kept a legit job as a front, partly because I didn’t want your Mom to know how deep I was in it. Eventually, though, I found myself in higher stakes situations and exchanges. The higher up you go, the more targets you have on your back in the streets and the more radars you’re under with the police. I got up in a perfect storm.”

“Enough for you to be looking at 20 to life, though?”

“I wasn’t transferred to Dixon just for drugs. I was brought here because of what went down when I was at County. You never knew that story ‘cause you were still a shorty, but I’ll tell you now. You need to hear the raw truth about what goes down in here. I’m not ashamed no more.

“When I first got locked up, they took me to County Jail. That’s basically where everyone goes straight out the gate. I was caught with enough on me to face a felony charge, but not enough to face life or maximum security. I expected to be out in one to three years, seven at the max. Probation was even on the table, so I thought I was still good.

“I had the job of cleaning the urinals, stalls, and showers on my block. I never had a problem until this one day when the guard left his post and I was the only one still working. Looking back on it now, I was being set up. Before I knew it, three other inmates came in, cornered me in a stall and beat me. I tried to fight them off. I got in a few good punches, too, but each of them was twice my size. They beat me so bad I couldn’t see out of my left eye for weeks after what happened.

“I was on the floor bleeding and thought that was the end of it, that it was over. But the next thing I know they stripped off my orange coveralls, then flipped me upside down head first into the toilet. I held my breath in between dunks, thinking they were trying to drown me. Come to find out, they did that just to muffle my screams. They sodomized me, Law.

“Someone found me a while later, bloody, laying half naked on the floor. I was in the infirmary for three weeks afterwards. I was healed up enough in two weeks, but the guards, the good ones, were trying to keep me safe. But it wasn’t me at that point who needed protecting. As soon as they let me out, I found that crew out on the yard and shanked them. One survived. It was at that point that my drug charges elevated to a double homicide. It took them a while, but they later transferred me to Dixon.”

“Um, wow. I, I didn’t know.”

“I know you didn’t that’s why I’m telling you now.

“You don’t want none of this life, son. You think you do, but you don’t. It’s never a one-sided thing. You don’t get to choose which parts you like and which parts you don’t want to keep. Once you go down the rabbit hole, you don’t get to just walk away without residue and consequences. I was seventeen when I first jumped down this rabbit hole – the same age you’ll be in a few months if you don’t die first.

“Do you know how much it tore me up to come here. It still does. I’ve just grown accustomed to it. Can you imagine how much it hurt that my firstborn son died? And on top of that to not be able to be there at his funeral, by you and your mother’s sides? Most of the cash I stashed up was confiscated as evidence against me. The little that was left in your Mom’s account paid for Lil’ John’s funeral, a better apartment for the two of you, and for Sheila to go back to school so she wouldn’t starve waiting on me. So I set ya’ll up best I could, you just didn’t know it.

 You don’t want none of this life. Not a life in regret. And definitely not life in prison.

“Stop trying to be someone you’re not. You wanna act all hard when you’re soft as hell. You’re noble and justice seeking. Law doesn’t stand for lawless. That’s not why I named you that. I hustled so you and your brother didn’t have to. I just went about it all wrong. Please don’t make my mistakes.

“Seventeen is significant for me because that’s when Bill became “Rouge.” I became buck wild, careless, and headed on a downward spiral of being Law-less. I named you Lawrence, Law, hoping it would have some sort of redemptive power over your life, son.

“‘Blessed *is* the man who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor stands in the path of sinners, nor sits in the seat of the scornful; but his delight *is* in the law of the Lord, and in His law hemeditates day and night.’ I got your name from Psalms 1:1-2, son.”

“Oh, so now you’ve found Jesus in this mug. You can miss me with that.”

“He was never the one lost. I was and I’m sorry that because of me, now you are, too. But I’m not here to preach to you. I’m coming to you with receipts, proof. Real proof.

“So I heard about Tré. My condolences because I know how close you both always were. Which brings me to my other point for getting you here to see me. I may be locked up, the streets still talk to me, even in here. And right now, the talk is all about you.”

“Me?”

“Yeah, you. So word has it that you’re out there trying to do your thang. I get it. It’s all around you. You saw me in it, your brother in it, Tré, too. Part of it can seem glamorous. You provide a product like a businessman, replenish your stash, keep the profits. I get it. What you don’t get is that real businessmen label their products so they know who got what, when, and where. It’s their way of respecting each other’s territory and avoiding a gang war unless absolutely necessary.”

“What are you talking about, Rogue?”

“Did you ever notice a pink lotus mark on Tré’s little Ziploc bags?”

“Umm…yeah. How you know about that?”

“I know a lot of stuff you don’t know… And did you know that that little pink lotus mark identified him and his South Side supplier to the other folks in the game, even them on the West Side of Chi?”

“Wait, what? I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I know you don’t. Your butt is so naïve that you’re out there distributing Tré’s stuff in the enemy’s camp. And I know it was you ‘cause my family still lives out that way. They saw you, but you didn’t see them. Lucky for you, Jody didn’t know what I know the night he popped Tré or he would’ve come straight for you. Your ambitious carelessness put that whole hit in motion.

“They took your actions as a sign of disrespect from the 79th Street set, and retaliated assuming Tre was the culprit.”

“I killed Tré,” Law said, breathlessly. “I didn’t know. I, I didn’t know…”

Tears well up in my eyes but I refuse to give him the satisfaction of thinking he made me cry. He’s caused enough tears. But in reality, he’s not to blame for these. I did this to myself. I did this to Tré. I killed him. That was supposed to be me. I’m still here, though. I can’t let Tré’s life be in vain. I’ve gotta represent. I, I… I don’t know…

“I hate you, Rogue!”

“No, son. You hate yourself! It’s like you’re a student at Hate University. Yeah, you may not like me right now, but the real truth is that you hate yourself more. You hate yourself so much you’re willing to let *my* mess ups be the excuse for *you* not even trying to do something better than me. You hate yourself so much, that you hate any other young man who looks like you, reminds you of you, challenges you. But you’re just too lost to even see it.

“Yeah, let that sink in. Let it all sink in. I want it to burn in your head enough for you to wake the hell up! You ain’t got time to be wasting time, Law. You out there trying to play a game and don’t even know the damn rules. You sitting there hiding under some hood on your head like you’ve got it all figured out. Like that’s your secret helmet in some street war. You don’t know half of what you think you know, Law. Now, someone’s lost his life because of it.

“Quit while you can, Law. You don’t want this coming back on you or your Mama.”

“You have five minutes left, sir.”

“Alright, thanks.

“I hope I scared the mess out of you with the truth. Your truth. Let this go. If not, you’ll be lucky to end up where I am. At least I’m still alive.

“Now gone and get out of here. Tell your Uncle John to come back for a minute. I need to tell him something, too.”

Bill calms himself and lands the palm of his left hand firmly against the glass, “Son, I love you.”

The only word I can clear pass my throat to Rogue is, “Bye.” I place the phone back on the receiver, stand slowly, and begin to walk away.

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“John, man, it’s good to see you.”

“You too, man. How you holding up in here.”

“It is what it is. I made my bed hard, now I’m lying in it. But as long as I have three hots and a cot, and keep my head on swivel, I’m cool. I’ve got a level of respect in here. A few of the dudes I used to run with outside are on my cell block, so I’m covered in here. Now I need you to cover my boy out there.”

“What can I do, man?”

“I’m inside, but I still got my connects on the outside. I hear some of everything going on, and what I hear now ain’t good but I can’t do anything from here to stop it.”

“Okay, go on.”

“It used to be that bros like me ran the streets. It looked like chaos to the cops, but it was organized chaos. People like me and Jeff (Ford) were to the street game, what Huey P. Newton, Fred Hampton, and Stokely Carmichael were to the Black Panther movement. We kept the crew focused on the mission, in governmental order, and respecting other folks’ territory. Now the cops got all us Old Schoolers either locked up or six-feet under. And anybody with real sense know that a three-headed beast is worse than the one you thought you killed before. These kids out there running around with guns like they’re walking through a life sized video game, just popping each other and anybody else just because they finally got a gat. Meanwhile, they’re building enemies, gang wars, and messing with folks’ livelihoods.”

“I hear you, Bill. So where do I come in? What’s all this got to do with Law?”

“I just told him directly, but word on the street is that Law went to the West Side selling rocks that had Tré’s watermark on the bags. So when Jody’s crew caught wind of it, they figured that Tré’s set was trying to infiltrate their market, and rightfully so. All the while, Tré knew nothing about it, and Law’s dumb butt put a target on his back trying to get a come up in the game.”

“Oh my, God.”

“Yeah, exactly, ‘cause at this point only God can save him because I can’t. What I didn’t tell Law was that since all this went down, word is that Jody now knows he didn’t finish the job when he popped Tré. He’s got his sights on my son, John.”

“What do we do? What can I do?”

“You got to figure out a way to get him out of the Chi for a while, at least until things here die down.”

“Get him where?”

“I don’t know that part. That’s why I’m talking to you. It’s got to be soon, man. I don’t even know if it’s safe for him to go to the funeral. That’s too easy of a target. Jody’s crew will figure that Tré’s people will be there mourning and with their guards down. You’ve got to get my son out of here, man. I can’t lose another one. Hell, Sheila can’t take losing another one. Can you help us?”

“Don’t worry, I’ll figure something out.”

“Do it quickly man. Please.”

Our drive back to the city is tense and quiet. We stop for a burger, but neither one of us can really eat. We never compare notes either. We just both know that Rogue told us some version of the same things.

It starts raining halfway home. I think that it’s a good thing ‘cause nobody’s trying to stand outside in the rain. It will be quiet on the set. I need time to think. I need time to figure out what to do.

Uncle John stops one last time for gas. He walks inside the convenient store and stays there longer than it takes to pay for a fill up. I know he’s really stepped out the car to call Mom. He wants to give her a candid debrief about his conversation with Rogue without me hearing what they discuss or decide. The last of the ride home is in silence.

Finally, I can see the brick tower I call home, and Uncle John parks the Caddy.

“Go upstairs a pack your bags. You’re going to stay with me farther out South until we figure out some things.”

“Pack. What about school?”

“I’ll drop you off and pick you up for the rest of this week. That will give me a little time to think.”

“What about Mom?”

“Don’t worry about your Mom. She’s actually safer right now if you’re not there. Nobody needs to spot you coming in and out of where she lays her head. Not right now.”

“I’ve got to leave home?”

“I’ve got to save your life.”

**Chapter 5 ~ “Too Big for Your Britches”**

“Ting. Ting.”

The chime rings as Mae steps through the beauty supply door. She’s frequented the store often throughout the years, and at one point was once considered a regular by the previous owner’s son, Caine. In fact, they would have become high school sweethearts if not for his meddlesome mother even way back then.

Mae’s only been back to Chicago once since the last time, which was for Lil’ John’s services. It was just too much bloodshed, too much heartache to take. Her family fled South when others were still coming North – for a very similar reason. So she rarely comes back.

Now her eyes are becoming readjusted to the store. The aisles of pixie cut wigs that she remembers are now few and far between. Now there are more rows and bundles of Yaki black, blue streaked lace fronts, and sleep bonnets the size of Chef Boyardee’s. She even sees fake eyelashes as big as butterflies.

Remembering the focus of her original conquest, Mae reaches for a can of natural curl enhancer and a jar of edge control nearby. Checking out, she heads back through the glass inset door.

“Ting. Ting.”

Mae steps outside to get her bearings. Seventy-ninth street is still buzzing with energy, even in the late autumn. Two black men converse about politics and race relations while waiting at the bus stop.

“You got to stay woke, my brother. Otherwise you’ll fall right into their trap. It’s all relevant, brother. The Klan is alive and well.”

“You got that right, man. Folks think because you don’t see white sheets coming up and down the street that they don’t exist anymore. I’m old enough to remember when they stoned Dr. King right over there in Marquette Park, down there on 67th Street.”

“Brother, they still around. They just in stealth mode, that’s all. Gotta stay woke. They have us thinking something wrong with us, have us hurting one another. Killing one another. Turning on one another.”

“Man, let some white hoods and sheets walk up and down 79th Street today, I bet you any one of these young thugs got something for ‘em!

“I know you right, right there, brother. I bet you they’d finally wake up then. I bet you they’d stop hurting each other then. They’d have to finally figure out how to work together.”

“Mae, is that you?” John asked.

“John! Oh my goodness,” Mae, said reaching out to embrace him. “I haven’t seen you in so long. How have you been?”

“I’m doing pretty fair. What brings you to Chicago, cousin, let alone 79th Street?”

“I came up here to handle some estate business. You know my Mom passed away about a year ago, and I’m still trying to decide what to do with the house.”

“Oh wow. Yeah, sorry I didn’t make it to the services, with work and all.”

“Everybody in the family knows you’re a workaholic, John. It’s okay.”

“How long are you up here?”

“Just two weeks or so. I’ve got to get some things settled with my tenants. I rented it out for the time being. Just to keep a watch over it so it’s not empty, especially in the winter. You know how brutal Chicago winters can be on water pipes if the heats not on.”

“I know that’s right. So where ya’ headed now?”

“I guess to this bus stop with these old geezers.”

“You’ll do no such thing. I’ve got a full tank of gas and can take you wherever you need to go, cousin. Plus, it will give us a chance to catch up.”

“Are you sure? I don’t want to put you out of your way.”

“I insist.”

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“Law, come sit with me. I need to talk to you,” Sheila said, settling in at the kitchen table, just home from work.

“What’s up?”

“Do you know what I do all day, every day?”

“I guess you work.”

“I work and I worry. I work hard to provide a decent home for you to lay your head, food for you to eat, clothes for you to wear. I have a good job, but the way prices are these days, I barely see any of my money. My rent for a one-bedroom apartment is fifteen hundred dollars, and that’s not even in a great neighborhood. But I do it and I don’t complain, I don’t ever complain because I’m sticking my neck out for you.”

“I’m working on something now Mom, to help you out.”

“I don’t need the type of help you’re working on, Law.

“I’ve been determined to take care of you, to make sure you had some of the opportunities I wanted and all of the ones I squandered. I keep trying because I have big dreams for you to go off to college or trade school.

“I’ve got this crazy dream in my head that maybe you’ll own a legit business or become a CEO, heck even a manager, anything more than rotting away in a jail cell or laying lifeless in a grave. But you know what’s even crazier? That I didn’t realize until now that I was pursuing that dream all alone. You don’t even want it!”

“That’s not true.”

“Not true? I can’t tell. I’ve been working my butt off to take care of you and all you seem to want to do is anything and everything to scare the life out of me,” Sheila said, now crying.

“I can’t sleep through the night ‘cause either you walk out or you sneak out. I’m worried throughout the day that you’ll get in trouble at school or stopped by the police. And now with all of this that has happened with Tré...I worry whether I’ll get a call that you’ve been shot again or worse, killed.

“These past few weeks have been so stressful, Law. I’m a nervous wreck,” Sheila said, pausing to take a deep breath. “I can’t protect you here, and your Dad tries to talk to you, but that only goes so far.

“I’ve already buried one son, Law. My heart can’t take no more. I love you…but you’ve got to go, at least for a while until things get better. Until either I’m able to move to a better area or you’re ready to change your decisions.”

“You’re putting me *out*?”

“I’m not putting you out. I’m saving your life, because right now, you don’t seem to have enough sense to want to do that for yourself. It’s tough enough growing up in Chicago. Believe me, I know. But if you want to deliberately run into the fire and test the odds, you’re just asking for more trouble added on top of it.”

“If you feel that way then I’ll go crash with one of my boys!”

“You will do no such thing,” Sheila said, wiping her face, and pointing her finger at Law. “You’re not hearing us. Your father told you. Your Uncle John spoke to you. Now I’m telling you, it’s not safe for you to stay here! They will kill you, Law. Point blank, period.”

“I not scared, and I ain’t no punk. My boys got me.”

“Got you! What they got? They don’t have a home of their own to put you in. They’re out here just like you trying to flex like they’re something they’re not. Running around here like they’ve got it all figured out. They got you? Did they have Tré? Heck, for that matter, did Tré have Tré? Because if he did, he should still be here!

“You are still a minor. A child. My child. And why you insist on going around like you’re a motherless child is beyond me! Your so-called friends who come and go as they please are really crying out for help, wishing their mamas didn’t work back-to-back shifts. Wishing they could come home to a hot meal. Wishing someone would step up a make a decision for them. Well, you’ve got a Mama, and I’ve made the decision. When Cousin Mae goes back to Tennessee, you’re going back with her! It’s already been arranged.

“Your Uncle John will drive the two of you there. I’ll get everything transferred over from your school, and that will be the end of it.”

“But what about…”

“I don’t care! I don’t care about you losing your friends or anything else you suddenly think is so important. I’m concerned about you losing your life.”

And just like that, I basically had one week to say goodbye. I told Bass and a few kids at school that I was going to Cali, that I had to lay low for a while, but should be back in time for senior year. Who really wants to say they’re moving to Tennessee? I could just stay, but I ain’t got my money right yet. And I can’t get my money right if I can’t run my hustle right. And I can’t run my hustle right, if I’m not here. Like eternally. I could just go out there and do my thing. I ain’t scared or nothing, but my Mom, man. She’s all torn up about this. Watching her cry just reminded me of when she loss my brother. She cried all the time. I don’t want to put her through that again. I’ve got to figure something out. I’ll just go along with this for now, until I can figure something out.

Within a week I am riding in the back seat of Uncle John’s Caddy for an eight-hour drive to Tennessee. (City), Tennessee to be exact. Mom sent me down here to get away from the violence and noise in Chicago. I was used to it. It’s in my DNA. It’s part of my hood, my culture. It wasn’t perfect, but it’s home. Always will be. But even with all the crazy things I’ve known there, ain’t none of it hit quite like watching my boy since childhood, shot dead in front of me.

I must have seen him get popped, at least the first time. That’s why my feet wouldn’t move. I couldn’t seem to make myself turn away. Craig had to push me to make me move. It was like I was stuck smack dab in the middle of a time warp. Right in the center of something that I could never imagine.

I showed up in the middle of the semester, so it’s taking a few days to get all my transcripts transferred from the Chi to here. But that’s all good for me. Gives me a minute to clear my head. In the meantime, Cousin Mae’s son, Echo, offered to take me around town. He just turned 19, so we’re close in age. Yet somehow he seems a lot older. It’s like he’s lived a whole other lifetime in the same time I’ve lived mine. I don’t know if it’s that he likes Throwback Hip Hop that makes him seem older or what. But it’s something about him. I just haven’t put my finger on it yet. Maybe he’s a church boy. Thank goodness he has a car, though. It ain’t nothing but an old Ford pickup truck, but out here, a piece of something is better than nothing. There’s no bus stops, hardly any street lights, no noise, and a bunch of dirt roads. It’s like we went back in time to one of the old black and white TV shows.

Echo plays the song, *“Tennessee,”* by Arrested Development on his old school Ford radio.

“Dude, are you actually driving around town playing a song about your own state? That’s some corny mess, boy,” Law said.

“*Man*, please. I hear that ‘boy’ mess all the time from the folks who don’t look like me.”

“Aww, I didn’t mean nothing of it. We say, ‘that’s my boy’ all the time back home.”

“Well home for you is up North. Home for me is down South. ‘Boy’ hits different down here. You’ll see.

“Anyway, it’s my car and my song choice. ‘Sides, I don’t see you with no keys in yo’ hands.”

“Alright, I hear you. What is ‘sides,’ though?”

“’Sides is ‘sides. Short for besides. Just like you go ‘round here talkin’ ‘bout some, ‘cause this and ‘cause that, when you really mean because.”

“Oh, okay. You ain’t gotta come for me, though.”

“I ain’t come for ya’. I’m just letting you know how things go around here.”

“What do mean?”

“Are you serious, man?”

“Yeah, I’m serious.”

“The word ’boy’ down here, coming from a white man to a black man, means he doesn’t see him as his equal. Like we’re beneath them. Like it’s still the 1960s or even the Jim Crow days.”

“Wait, really? I had a teacher back in the Chi talking about that stuff. But that was back in the day.”

“Back in what day, yesterday? Certain pockets down here still can trip you up. Don’t go driving by yourself in the wrong pocket at night. You’ll see what I mean. They’ll try to put you in your place real quick.”

“Put me in my place? Yeah, right. Whatever…*man*.”

I start to listen to some of the *Tennessee* lyrics. Dude’s bars are a Hip Hop prayer telling God,

*“For some strange reason it had to be,*

*He guided me to Tennessee.*

*Take me to another place, take me to another land,*

*Make me forget all that hurts me, let me understand your plan.”*

I wonder what Mom’s up to at home right now? By now she’d be just getting back to 3E, probably about to whip up something to eat. Bass is probably still going through the racks at the record store, and Tré… Aww man, sometimes I forget he’s gone. I didn’t even get a chance to say goodbye, not even at the funeral. We hit the road that morning. Didn’t even get a chance to pay my respects. How did I get here? God knows I don’t know.

“So, Echo. What kind of name is that?”

“Wait a minute. First you insult my music. Then you call me a boy. Now you wanna come for my name?”

“Naw, man. It’s not like that,” cutting off a chuckle. “But you got to admit that it is a little different. At least with my name you know it’s short for Lawrence.”

“But you don’t go by Lawrence, do you?”

“Man, that’s my government name. Everybody who knows me calls me, Law. So, is Echo short for something?”

“Not a thing. My father gave me that name.”

“Like, that’s what’s on your birth certificate and all?”

“Sure is.”

“Why?”

“Because he always wanted me to be my own man. Echoes reflect back to you who you really are. Pop’s wanted me to have a clear voice in the world. To know my value and worth, so nobody else had to tell me.

“The world can be tricky and cruel, especially down here. You’ve got to really know who you are or it will snatch your name right out of your throat.”