**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.
32. “History of the Hood”
33. A new teacher bravely challenges Law’s new history class to look at the history of the KKK, the reason they wear hoods, and ways it may overlap in meaning with why black boys/teens wear hoods in urban city’s today.
34. Open your eyes, Law. They trained us to hate ourselves. So every time we hurt “ourselves,” we’re walking out exactly what they taught us to do… whether it shows up in the form of the house nigger vs. the field nigger, or the Crypts vs. the Bloods, to me, it’s all the same difference.”
36. “Not Far from the Tree”

X. “A New Creed of Law” – 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. *Psalms 1:1-2 NKJV*

* 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 ~ “The Creed of Law”**

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 2023 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,” Law said, pausing from his random doodling on the edge of armrest desk. “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 me, 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 lines of fire 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. She signs my release papers, and I start getting dressed. The loan me a pair of hospital scrub pants because my jeans were cut off of me to examine my wound. I put back on my now blood-splattered kicks, and raise my hood over my head.

I’m learning to readjust my weight onto the crutches to relieve the pain. We walk a short distance down the hall towards the exit when I notice an open curtain for 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. As 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 lying on the gurney over there,” she said, pointing to Craig, a few feet away. “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 really sure?”

“Let’s pray so. Just have a seat with your friend until we can find out.”

“No, Mom. I’ll wait here with you.”

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

“Hello. Are you the mother of Terrance Avery, III?” The nurse 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 guard. 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. But 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, Mama. We’re our own police out here.”

“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, and we’re still trying. You don’t have to go this way. You just don’t. This isn’t who you are or even who I raised you to be…

“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 to help or just in time to catch me doing something wrong.

I can hear the door of his Cadillac close shut. He’s always driven a Caddy. 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… “You know better than that, Law. You weren’t raised like that, Law.” But they forget that the streets outside of 3E help raise me, too. That vibe of thrive and survive outside this apartment teaches me just as much about life, and I can’t forget what I’ve learned.

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 to settle a beef. So I’ve actually got mad respect for him, but I can’t let him see that right now.

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, taking his broad, six-foot tall stance in the center of the floor.

“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.

“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 the ER, and the other on a slab in a morgue.

“I ain’t trying to hear all that.”

“Oh, I thought you said you didn’t feel like talking. So shut up and listen.

“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, and 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. 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 path 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 Tré 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. *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-headed beast 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 folks 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. You’re the only one I know on the outside who’s clean enough to do this the right way. I don’t want no more drama for Sheila to have to clean up on the back end.”

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 each of 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 three-flat I call home, and Uncle John parks the Caddy.

“Go upstairs and pack your bags. You’re going to stay with me out farther 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 I get that you may feel fatherless, but 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! That’s it, point blank period. 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 shotgun in Uncle John’s Caddy for an eleven-hour drive to Tennessee. Nashville, Tennessee to be exact. Mom couldn’t afford to take the days off from work, but 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,” Law said, 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, naw, 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 the sound of who you really are. Pop’s wanted me to have a clear voice in the world. To always 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 life will snatch your name right out of your throat.”

**Chapter 6 ~ “The Hood Has Two Faces”**

This place feels like a ghost town compared to the Chi.

I’ve been here almost two weeks already, and the most action I’ve seen anywhere is their little downtown or maybe Fisk University. Still, even both of those are a few miles away. I’m in North Nashville. It’s basically the black part of town. And their thick syrupy accents remind me that I’m really in the South every single minute of every single day.

I’m so bored I can hardly stand it. Echo says he’ll take me to some more of their hot spots so I don’t go stir crazy. But even that sounds like a joke to me compared to back home.

Mom calls me every few days trying to talk me down and said, “Chill, because it’s easy to find trouble. It’s harder to avoid it.”

I miss home like crazy. I miss Mom, too, but you’ll never hear me say that out loud to anyone but her. I haven’t seen her this whole time. It just feels weird.

I start school next week as some crazy requirement of Mom and Cousin Mae’s. I don’t see the point of it, though. I can make more money now than all my teachers and principals put together. And I’m technically old enough to dropout. But I’ll go along with it until I figure out my next move – for Mom’s sake and all.

All I know now is that I have to figure out some way to get home soon. I’ve gotta make things right for Tré. I know my boys got it covered with Jody, but still, Tré was blood. And if Rogue was right about what he was saying, then Tré’s blood is on my hands. So I’ve got to make all this right somehow. I’ve got to.

Plus, that prime real estate and rock clientele Tré had should stay in the family, not go to somebody like Craig. I barely know him, and he barely knew Tré. It should just stay in the family is all I’m saying.

I came out here on the front porch of Cousin Mae’s white wooden house to at least watch people and cars pass by. I’ve only counted five of each in the last half hour, and even that feels odd. It’s like I’m in a time warp and all the people, the noise, and the traffic got sucked right out of it.

It’s also the first time I’ve sat on a stoop since the night they popped Tré. But instead of feeling shell shocked or like my head’s on swivel, I just feel empty.

I’m sitting on one of the broken-in steps, just randomly drawing something. Maybe because I’m bored. But I did find this sketchpad that Mom must have dropped in my backpack, because I never ever seen it before. I used to draw all the time when I was a shorty. I’d sketch superheroes and cartoon characters. Then I started creating my own cartoons, quote bubbles and everything. Mom was sure I’d become an artist or something.

I’m just letting the pencil led touch the page though, to pass the time. This feels weird, too, but in a good way. Once Lil’ John died, and then Rogue went to prison, I guess a part of me died and got locked up, too. I just stopped drawing any more. I figured it was time to grow up and face the fact that the world isn’t really made up of superheroes. No one is coming to the rescue me or save the day. I had to find a way to save myself. I think that’s when Tré and I got real close. We didn’t seem to have much in common until then. He spent more time with Lil’ John than anything, and looked at me as the baby. But when my brother was gone, by default, folks in the family started calling me the man of the house. Everything else just fell in line from there. Or maybe it fell apart. I don’t know…

“Man, you ready to go?” Echo asks, walking intently out the front door.

“Sure. Where we headed? You know what, it don’t even matter. Let’s just go,” Law said, scooping his black hood over his head and white earbuds.

“I need to run a few errands for the house, and I figure I’d give you a bit of a tour while we’re out,” Echo said, walking towards the truck parked on the gravel covered driveway.

“Sounds good to me,” Law said, following closely and stepping up to the passenger’s side of Echo’s truck.

“So tell me what happened to bring you down to the sticks, as you call it.”

“I never called Tennessee the sticks.”

“You may as well have. So, well, what happened?”

“I got into some trouble at home is all.”

“Man, I know that much or you wouldn’t have interrupted a school year to come down here. What actually happened?

“Mom said something about your Uncle John trying to keep you safe for a while after cousin Tré got killed.”

“Man, I don’t feel like talking about that.”

“Why not? It ain’t like I’m some judge with an angry jury and jail to throw you in. Plus, you’re riding in my truck for free. Eating our food for free. Staying in our house for free. The least you can do is tell me why.”

“Let me stop you there, bro. Knowing my Mom and Uncle John, I doubt very seriously that they didn’t agree to break off some cash to your mom for my expenses. Second, you give me a few weeks, I’ll get my grind back up running and will pay you back myself.”

“So is that what brought you here, your street corner hustle?”

“What do you know about anything, Echo?”

“I know enough. There’s plenty going on down here, too. We’ve got drug dealers, shootings, and other crime in parts of Nashville, too. Black folks kill each other here, too, probably almost as much as ya’ll. You just don’t hear about it as much as we hear about what goes on in Chicago.”

“So why is that?”

“We’ve got other issues popping off that compete for all our time. While ya’ll spend all your time focused on each other.”

“What’s all that supposed to mean?”

“I mean ya’ll up there like crabs in a barrel fighting over a corner that don’t have your name on it for some drugs you barely smart enough to sale. You up there shooting each other up for no good reason at all. Meanwhile, we’re down here in smack dab in the middle of the 21st century but living like it’s still 1955. We still have visual reminders that some white folks still hate us just for being black.”

“Man, miss me with that.”

“So are you saying you don’t think racism is still a thing?”

“Naw, I’m not saying that. What I am saying is that I’m more likely to get popped by someone who looks just like me than not. We keep acting like white folks got all the power. I bet you whether I’m holding a gun or not, they’re more afraid of me than I ever have to be of them.”

“That may be true, but have you ever thought about why? They’re afraid of our greatness.”

“What does that even mean?”

“I can’t explain it all, but I know it’s true. It’s like they’re afraid of who we’ll become if we ever wake up and stop hating each other like they taught us to do. Like, one day, we’ll all figure out how to work together and retaliate for slavery, Jim Crow, and everything else they ever done to us in this country.”

“Nobody white taught me to hate nobody black. All that just comes with what goes down on the street. The way I see it, if anything, all that street drama just teaches me to love my hood and my crew even more.”

“Law, even that though is proving my point. We’ve created our own segregation within the segregation whites taught us. It used to be the slaves in the master’s house were taught to be against the slaves in the field. Then it went to light skinned blacks being taught they were better than dark skinned blacks. Now it’s watered down all the way to one block of black gangs and drug dealers against another block of gangs and drug dealers, and all ya’ll too dumb to realize you live in the same neighborhood in the first place! That’s all I’m saying.”

“Dude, you sound like my old Civics teacher. How old are you, seventy-five?”

“Naw, man. You know I’m just nineteen. I’ve just had some life lessons to go along with what you’ve only heard in a class or read in a textbook. It hits different when you actually live some of that stuff out and can see it up close and personal. That’s all I’m saying. Plus, I spent most of my time growing up around my Dad and Grandpa before they died. They schooled me well.”

“I think they spoiled you well. You sound just like the only child in the family that you are, Echo.”

“I may be the only child, but I benefitted from a lot of positive attention as a result of it. I had two real men pouring into me since day one. I guess it just shows.”

“So what have you seen so up close and personal to get you all revved up? ‘Cause the way I see it, America is America, no matter where you are or how you experience it.”

“It’s easy for you to say that because you haven’t experienced it. You don’t know nothing but the few blocks in your neighborhood that you think are the whole world. When in fact that so called ‘hood’ is just a drop in the bucket compared to what’s going on everywhere that you’re too small to even see.”

“I’m not small.”

“But you’re small minded if you think that your hood is the biggest thing going and the main thing you’ve got to conquer. There’s a whole society out there, businesses, systems, everything. Meanwhile, you’re walking around here like you all caught up in *The Matrix*.”

“*The Matrix*? What are you talking about now?”

“You never saw that movie?”

“No, and I don’t want to either.”

“We’ll watch it tonight, ‘cause you need something to help you wake up!”

“Whatever, bro.”

“Whatever is right. All I know is that there have been a lot of stuff right there under the surface the whole time for most folks. In some ways it was always there, and may always be there. It’s just that depending on where you live in America, you may have had the luxury of pretending it wasn’t even there anymore. But I know one thing, things haven’t been the same since all that stuff with George Floyd. That stuff right there woke a lot of folks up to a lot of things.”

“Bro, I left my Civics teacher back in Chicago.”

“Well I hope you remember what she taught you, ‘cause you’re gonna see it come to life here.”

“Whatever. I thought you were supposed to be showing me around some more?”

“Whatever? You’ll see for yourself,” Echo said. “Anyway, you see that white building coming up on the right?”

“Yeah, I see it.”

“We’re in Columbia, a suburb of Nashville. That building right there is the Maury County Courthouse where an 18-year-old Black teen was lynched from the second-story balcony nearly a century ago. And it wasn’t because a judge sentenced him to death. The lynch mob from outside brought him inside to kill him themselves, and nobody stopped them.”

“What did he do?”

“What do you mean, ‘what did he do?’ He died!”

“No. I mean what did he do that provoked his death?”

“The 18-year-old lynched in 1927 was Henry Choate. He was accused of assaulting a white 16-year-old girl. He was jailed, but a mob of hundreds of white people kidnapped him from his cell. He was tied to the back of a car and dragged across town, and eventually hanged in front of the Maury County Courthouse. Choate was one of at least 20 Black men in Maury County to be lynched or kidnapped and presumably killed by the KKK or white mobs.”

“The other thing to watch out for are these so called, sundown towns. These spots still exist in certain parts, even though some of them no longer have written laws supporting it. So stay where people look like you, man. That’s all I’m saying,” Echo said.

“Sundown towns, what the hell is that?”

“Just what you said, a hell. They are towns that still go by the notion that blacks shouldn’t be there after the sun goes down. It’s some white folks’ way of keeping their town segregated after business hours for only themselves. If you’re found there after then, you’re on your own.

“If you ride through there, you’ll still see all kinds of Confederate flags flying, black baby dolls hanging from trees… It’s like its stuck in a Jim Crow time warp. They refuse to change.”

“Dude, I’m from the South Side of Chicago.” Law said, defiantly. “I don’t know what all that’s supposed to mean, but I ain’t scared of nothing and no one.”

“Man, you sound like a fool. There are more historic sundown towns in your great state of Illinois than there are here in Tennessee! What do you think the letters in Anna, Illinois stands for...Ain’t No Negros Allowed, Illinois! You need to wake up.”

“Again, man what is all that supposed to mean? It’s 2023. I’ve never even heard of Anna, Illinois. And if I ain’t afraid in my own hood, I ain’t afraid there, here, or anywhere. Besides, how do you know all this stuff? Heck, why do you know all this stuff? It’s like you’re an old man trapped in a young man’s body.”

“I ain’t trapped nowhere. I just always liked being aware of stuff. Down here, you need to be aware of stuff. There’s more to life than just holding down your four-block ‘hood, here. ‘Cause depending on what neighborhood you find yourself in late at night, your enemy may not even look like you. You may have a different hood you’re dealing with then.

“Now to answer your question, for one, that memorial sign in front of that there building tells the whole story about the Maury County Courthouse. All you have to do is read. For two, this is the kind of stuff you need to know to keep safe. It’s like there are invisible lines telling you where black folks still aren’t really wanted or welcomed. It’s one thing to know the invisible lines and choose to ignore them. It’s another thing all together to not even know they exist. That type of ignorance can get someone killed.

“So, you still never answered my real question. What happened that brought you here?”

“Umm…I’ll tell you later.”

Echo drives me past the bowling alley and movie theater to show me where everyone hangs out. Then on to the Home Depot for some supplies to fix a leaky sink at the house and winterize all the windows before it gets too cold. I don’t know what they consider cold here, though. I lived with them Hawk winds in the Chi all my life. You don’t know real cold until you’ve felt them!

A couple hours later we make it back to the house, and Cousin Mae is back from her Sunday morning at church. Thank goodness she doesn’t make Echo or me go. I believe in God and all, I just have a beef with Him on a few things. So we’re not quite on speaking terms right now.

“Law, I’m your cousin, not your Mama. I’m not gonna be waking you up for school every morning like you’re some baby. Breakfast will be on the table by 7:30 a.m. I’ll cook because I enjoy it, and because I promised Sheila I’d house and feed you while you’re here. Cleaning your clothes and your room is up to you. Getting good grades is up to you. Staying out of trouble is up to you. I’m here to give you a second chance, but whether you take it or not…”

“Let me guess, Mama, ‘is up to you.”

“Echo, I don’t need you living up to your name on my behalf. I can speak to Law well enough on my own.

“Now Law, there’s a school bus that most high school kids take. Or the city bus stop is about four blocks over. I recommend you take the school bus so you get to know some of the students along the way because unfortunately, the closest school to us has a full enrollment this semester. So they can’t accept you for admission right now, maybe in the spring. Which means that we could only get you into the larger high school, but that’s on the other side of county line. But they’re willing to accept you. You just need to be on your best behavior and be open to new things and new people.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“You, um, well. You’ll be fine, Law. Just remember what I said. Be open to new things.”

“Mom, I can drop him off on my way to work every morning. I thought the purpose of Law being down here was for us to lookout for him. I don’t know that it’s safe for him to go through all those different neighborhoods alone, not until he at least knows his way around.”

“That’s all well and good, but your schedule changes sometimes. What will he do then? He needs to figure out a Plan B, too.”

“I don’t mind, as long as he minds you,” Echo said. “Law, do we have a deal?”

“Yeah man, anything but the bus.”

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It’s Monday morning and as promised, Echo drives me to my new school. It looks like an old castle, yet new, as if it were recently built to represent another era. There’s that time warp again.

Cars are lined up dropping kids off behind the school buses. Other kids are walking from the student parking lot. Yep, there are enough kids with cars here to have their own space. And these aren’t cheap cars either. I see some of the latest Mazdas, Toyotas. I even see a Maxima and a Kia. Man, you couldn’t keep them on the street back home without someone jackin’ them.

As I climb the cathedral-like staircase to the school, again I’ve got the same key question. How did I get here?

I finally reach the top of the twenty–plus stairs and walk through a door that seems as tall as the sky. On the other side is a sea of nothing but white faces. I can count the black ones as I pass down the hall on just one hand. Okay, maybe two. It’s clear though that I no longer represent the majority in the room. I feel outnumbered but somehow important at the same time. At least I stand out! At least there’s another flavor in the room than vanilla. At the same time though, I have never felt quite this way when I show up in a room. It’s obvious that I’m a new face, not just because I am, but because my cocoa brown skin puts a spotlight on me that obviously no one wants to ignore.

I’m caught between liking that they can’t ignore me, and feeling bad for the reason why they can’t ignore me. I’ve never felt embarrassed or ashamed of being black, and I don’t right now. What I do feel is obvious. And I can tell that obvious is actually offensive to some of these vanilla boys, not all of them, but definitely some. For the first time that I can remember, I feel pressure to prove some of them wrong. It’s like I can hear Mom saying to me though, “This is a fresh start. Don’t mess up.” So part of me hopes I measure up. But the other part don’t give a damn what these folks think. I’ve got to represent my hood. All of this must be what Cousin Mae was talking about before. “Be open to new things.” Yeah, right. We’ll see.

I can tell from their faces that some automatically think I’m bad because I’ve got a hood on my head. Some seem to assume they know my type because of the twists in my hair. Others, I don’t know what they think. I’m sure they all either will confirm or deny my thoughts soon enough, though.

I’m taking all this in while navigating the map and schedule the school clerk placed in my hands. My first period class is Modern Day History. I am not looking forward to being this bored, this early in the morning. The name written on the white board says Mr. Sheldon. He’s probably some dried out middle-aged white boy who sits around reading Time Magazine in his spare time.

Looks like the teacher’s not in here yet. I’m the last one to enter just before the bell rings. I walk to the open corner pocket seat near the back window of the class. By the time I turn around and get settled, I see his face. Wait a minute. Mr. Sheldon is a *black* man? What!

“Good morning class. Let’s all get settled in and welcome our new student, Lawrence Davis from Chicago,” Mr. Sheldon said. “He’ll be with us this semester and maybe for the rest of the school year if he likes us enough. So everyone be nice.”

“Now class, you know we always start a new week discussing a modern day history news event to get our juices flowing and make our history lessons relevant to us today. Most times it’s very recent, or something that has happened within your lifetime. Today, for the sake of cultural context, we’re going to discuss something that happened within my lifetime.”

“Well then, that’s ancient history, Mr. Sheldon,” a student joked.

“You will all be in your thirties before you know it, so indulge me.

“For today, I present before you the case of James Byrd Jr. His story takes place in Jasper, Texas about nine years before most of you were born, in 1998. Mr. Byrd was a 49-year-old Black man, who was murdered by three men, two of whom were avowed white supremacists. It is recorded that on June 8, 1998, Mr. Byrd accepted a ride from Shawn Berry (age 23), Lawrence Brewer (age 31), and John King (age 23). Mr. Byrd was acquainted from around town with Shawn Berry, who in some accounts was said to be driving. Instead of taking Mr. Byrd home, the three men took Mr. Byrd to a remote county road, beat him severely, spray-painted his face, urinated and defecated on him, and chained him by his ankles to their pickup truck before dragging him for about three miles. An autopsy reported that Mr. Byrd was conscious for much of the dragging, but died about halfway along the route when his right arm and head were severed as his body hit a concrete culvert.”

“Hey, wait a minute, this sounds a lot like what happened to a dude named Henry back in 1927.”

“Mr. Lawrence, thank you for your eager response. We raise our hand first in class to be recognized, but I’ll yield the floor to you this time,” Mr. Sheldon said.

“Thanks, but you can call me, Law. “Henry was 18, black, and accused of assaulting a white 16-year-old girl. They threw him in jail, but an angry mob of hundreds of white folks kidnapped him from his cell. They then tied him to the back of a car and dragged him across town. And as if that wasn’t enough, they eventually hanged in front of the Maury County Courthouse.”

“Thank you, Mr. Law for sharing that bit of history. And how is that you’ve come to know so much about Mr. Henry Choate?”

“My cousin just drove me past that courthouse the other day. There’s a historic landmark sign in front of the building telling the whole story. But I thought he was lying when he said that stuff still happens today. I thought he was exaggerating.”

“Unfortunately Mr. Law, your cousin wasn’t exaggerating. That is in fact a dark yet true moment of Tennessee history. What was also unfortunate, was that historically, 16-year-old Sarah Harlan was never able to identify Henry Choate as her actual attacker. Some historic records also say that Mr. Choate was hanged from the second floor of the courthouse, which means the mob either entered the building or otherwise had access to the building without being stopped.”

“So class, what correlations do we see between the news story I shared and what your new, and apparently very observant, classmate has shared?

“Well, isn’t the Maury County Courthouse the same building that’s been highlighted in the news recently?” One student asked. “That country singer um, Jason Aldean just featured it in his music video for his new song. It’s called *Try That In a Small Town*. I’ve heard reports that it was racially motivated, but I didn’t understand why people would feel that way until now.”

“In his absence, I’ll note that he states that none of the lyrics are overtly racially driven,” Mr. Sheldon said…

“How can you defend him,” Law asked.

“Who, Mr. Aldean? I’m not defending him, merely pointing out what he has said in his own defense. My role is to present all the facts so that together, we can come to a conclusion.

“So given the facts before us class, what can each of us do to help change this narrative?”

“What do you mean by change it? People are people. You can’t change anybody who don’t want to be change,” Law said.

“Mr. Law, yes there’s merit in what you just said. However, there’s also merit in our efforts to change and impact society for the better, even if it’s just one of us at a time.

“As I’ve said several times to our class before, I took this job at West Central High because I want to not only help educate and shape the minds of future leaders. I also want to change the narrative about who can teach whom, and who can learn from whom. We all have something unique to contribute and gain from one another. Until we first see the flaws and vulnerabilities within ourselves, we’ll never be able to change the flaws in someone else.

“I appreciate your candor Mr. Law. Does anyone else care to weigh in, too? I see your hand Ms. Jillian.”

“Mr. Sheldon, I agree with, what’s your name again?”

“Law.”

“I agree with Law. I think that people should spend less time trying to change the world and spend more focus on being there best selves. If we do the work within on our own, then eventually color doesn’t play a role in how we see the world or interact with everyone else. Didn’t Dr. King say that he wanted his children to live in a world where they weren’t judged based on the color of their skin but the content of their character?”

“Well said, Ms. Jillian and noted. I’ll also note, however, that many scholars today when reflecting on that famous quote believe wholeheartedly that Dr. King wasn’t encouraging a world that’s colorblind or even implying that, that was even possible. Instead, perhaps he was underlining that the playing field needed to be even through equal opportunities and equal justice. Oh, and by the way, there was some form of justice for Mr. Byrd. Shawn Berry, Lawrence Brewer, and John King were tried and convicted for Mr. Byrd's murder. Lawrence Brewer and John King received the death penalty and were executed in 2011 and 2019 respectively, while Shawn Berry is serving life in prison.

“What they all did was a proven KKK driven hate crime, and they paid for it. Brewer and King are said to be the first white people executed in the state of Texas for killing a black person since 1854. The crazy thing is that, that 1854 execution was of a white farmer for killing the slave of another white farmer. So it was a property issue.”

“Mr. Sheldon.”

“Yes, Mr. Law.”

“I notice that you keep saying Mister Byrd, but the other men you just call by their full names. Is there any special reason why?”

“I owe respect to every human being. However, Mr. Law, I only give honor where honor is due.”

“Now class, turn to chapter seven in your textbook and let’s look at what the author says about modern day race relations and how and why they can escalate into hate crimes.”

Wow. Mr. Sheldon is intense. I get it though. Every real man’s got to know where to draw the line… And my line just got drawn to that fine honey right over there! Man! I never considered a white girl before, but considering I’ll be sitting in a sea of them for a minute, I don’t mind a little cream in my coffee. She can run circles around those little chicken heads back in my old school. I’m gonna have to holler at old girl…

“…So read ahead to chapter eight for your homework assignment and be prepared to give an example of how equity plays out in today’s society.”

“Hey man, I saw you checking out old girl when she agreed with you,” Law hears from over his right shoulder just as the bell rings. “She’s cool and all, her brother Chad is, too. But she’s definitely out of your league.”

“How do you know? You don’t even know me.”

“My name’s Tim,” extending a fist bump to greet him. “So at least now you know me.

“I don’t mean no disrespect, bro. I’m just saying that while she may be good people, and fine, her dad is old school. He don’t play that blurred line stuff. He’s a county sheriff, and I mean that in the old Southern way. It’s alright to have a blonde honey. I’ve even had one. Just not that one, bruh.”

I gather my book, notepad, and again my schedule and map. Trying not to look obviously stumped, I ask Tim directions to my next class.

“Oh you’ve got Mrs. Davidson for Trig with me. I’m walking that way.”

“Cool, man thanks. Or maybe Ms. Jillian wouldn’t mind escorting me?”

“I heard my name. Who called me,” Jillian asked.

“That would be me, Law, at your service.”

“Bruh, remember what I said…”

“Whatever, man. So, um, Jillian, do you know how I can find Mrs. Davidson’s math class?”

“I thought I heard someone calling me. She’s on the way towards the gymnasium where I’m headed now.”

“Bruh?”

“I’ll hit you back, Tim,” Law said, smoothly walking alongside his new interest and her friends.

I’ve been tracking this honey Jillian for three weeks now, and finally she gives me her number. We’ve been texting a lot since, and I definitely wanna hook up. I think she’s feeling me, too. There’s a football game right after school that I’m checking out with Tim. He’s cool peeps, runs track in the spring, so most of his time now is spent conditioning through the off season. He’s gonna give me a ride back to the crib so Echo doesn’t have to double back this way again. But if I have my way, I’ll be walking Ms. Jillian home first. She’s a cheerleader, too. So I’ve got to get with that.

“West Central pulls out another win,” Tim said.

“Yeah, that was a good game.”

“You ready to head out?”

“Um, sure, but let me holler at old girl first.”

“Bruh, you still chasing after that?”

“Hell yeah!”

“I told you, she’s out of your league.”

“Well obviously she thinks differently ‘cause she’s walking over here now.”

“I don’t want no part of this. I’ll meet you at the car.”

“Hi Law.”

“Hey Jillian. That was a good game. I bet they won because you were over there shaking that lil’ skirt of yours.”

“I’m a cheerleader, not a rainmaker. But I did my part.”

“So, um, where you headed now?”

“I usually go out for pizza with the team, but maybe I can do something different. I’m actually ready to go home.”

“Well you shouldn’t have to walk alone.”

“I actually don’t have to walk if I don’t want. My brother has a car and can get me home. I just don’t feel like waiting for him to come out of the locker room and stuff.”

“That’s right, he’s on the team.”

“He’s the quarterback. He *is* the team.”

“Well excuse me! Then maybe I can walk you home instead. That is, if you don’t mind?”

“I’m on the other side of the train tracks, so it’s not a quick walk. Plus, it’s getting late.”

“Then maybe my boy Tim won’t mind us dropping you off right quick.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah, come on.”

Finally, finally, I’m making some traction. If this was back home, I would’ve pulled this girl the first day I said hello. I’m patient though. I’ll play her little game. We’re walking side by side alongside the football field towards the parking lot. All the games back home were always played in a rented park field or stadium. In the hood, you can count the high schools on one hand that have their own football field. It’s like a different world out here. A freedom. I was complaining at first, but now I realize I can relax. I don’t need to have my head on swivel every minute. My hood is always in me and where I’m from, forever. I miss Tré, and my set, but I can get used to this.

“Yo’ Tim!” Law shouts over to where Tim is leaning on his car, talking with some friends. “Jillian needs a ride home with us. You down?”

“A what?”

“She needs a ride home, bro.”

“Bruh, I told you, I’m staying out of this.”

“I can just wait for Chad, if it’s a problem,” Jillian said.

“Bro?”

“Uh...alright. But let’s make this quick. It’s getting late.”

“Wait a minute, and you’re both climbing in the back seat like I’m some Uber driver!”

“Help me out, man.”

“Come on, let’s go.”

I’m back here making the most of these few minutes. She’s cool people. Meanwhile, Tim up there trying to block a brother. All I know is that I’m shooting my shot.

Jillian said she lived on the other side of the tracks, and she ain’t lying. The grass on everyone’s lawn looks like green carpet. Bump that. Ashtro-Turf! You can sit Cousin Mae’s house into one of these homes three times. Then 3E, man probably like six times at least. This is the first time I’ve seen real life white-picket fences and toy size dogs running around without a leash. Man in the Chi, everybody wants a French Bull Dog so much until it would be jacked before the owner blinked good. Jillian seems nervous, but I can tell she’s feeling me, too.

“I’m that third house on the left.”

“The one with the yellow siding?” Tim asked.

“Yeah, that’s mine. Well, my parents’. I just live there. Thanks for the ride, Tim.”

“Hold up. I’ll walk you to your door.”

“Bruh, you doing too much.”

“Man, why you all scary and stuff. I’ll be right back.”

“I’m telling you, you get out of this car now, you get home on your own.”

“Tim, stop tripping.”

“I’m serious.”

“Alright then. I’ll see you at school,” Law said, lifting his hood over his head.

“Okay, I’m out.”

“Is everything alright, Law?”

“Yeah, no biggie. I’ll figure it out. It’s all about you now. What do you want to do?”

“Let’s just sit outside a few minutes. It’s a while before my Dad gets home, but Mom should be here soon.”

“Okay, that’s cool for now. So tell me about Jillian. What else haven’t you told me?”

I learned that old school conversation from Tré, He’d ask girls stuff like that all the time to get in their head, make them feel important to you. It cuts through a lot of relationship red tape. But I do like her though, I’m just human. We talk for what seems like an hour. I had to go in for the kiss. She didn’t pull back none either. I wonder if she’s ever dated a black boy? Or what she’s really thinking. This feels like some crazy utopia. Like I stepped into some perfect sitcom scene on TV. There’s no noise. No traffic. No nothing. I knew it. White folks don’t hate me no more than I hate myself, and I don’t.

A white Dodge pickup slowly pulls into the driveway. The man turns off the engine, placing his tan cowboy hat on his head as he steps out.

“Jilly, who is this!”

“Oh Dad, this is just my friend Lawrence.”

“Nice to meet you, sir.”

“Boy, who are you?”

“Like Jilly just said, my name is Lawrence, but my friends call me Law.”

“Well, you ain’t no friend of mine and you need not be a friend of hers. And I’m the only man who calls her Jilly! Do you hear what I said, boy?”

“Um…I ain’t gonna be too many more of your boys. Now maybe we got off on the wrong foot. So how about, if you respect me, I can respect you.”

“Nigger, get your black ass off my porch.”

Wait… What? I know I just heard what I think I heard, but I can’t believe it. I have a million words rushing through my mind, and yet I can’t seem to get my mouth open to say even one of them. How is that even possible. I’ve rehearsed in my head over and over what I’d do or say. But I’m stuck. I’ve heard those exact words before from my boys. My real boys. Now, even that word sounds different. This time warp is at it again. This time though, I’m the one sucked up in it.

**Chapter 7… “What’s the Difference?**

I must be in shock.

I didn’t say anything. Why didn’t I say anything?

I’ve rehearsed that conversation in my head a thousand times. But when it actually happened, I just froze. I didn’t knock him out. I didn’t even cuss him out. I just stood there and took it like some simp. Was I embarrassed? Was I trying to save face in front of Jillian? I don’t know why.

I’ve never had a white person call me out of my name before. It’s not like I’ve never heard the N-word or even used it with my boys, but this hits different. It was like in her father’s mind we were back in 1955 and I was some Colored Boy who didn’t have a right to be on his side of the tracks. Literally.

Why am I just realizing that the flag I saw flying outside of Jillian’s home wasn’t the regular American flag? It was a flag of stars and stripes in the shape of an X. Why is it just dawning on me now what that meant about her neighborhood? What that meant about her family and her home? But this can’t be what I think it is, right? It’s not like I’m in some throwback episode of the Dukes of Hazard or something.

I’m already walking back towards the school, half way there at least. Now I’m thinking twice about what Echo said about sundown towns. I thought he was making all that stuff up to get in my head. Looks like he was actually trying to warn me. I’m ready now though, if someone else tries something else. I sure wish I still had my piece with me. Uncle John took the one I had from Tré I don’t know how he found it. All I know is that I packed it in Chicago, and it was gone by the time I got to Nashville, Tennessee.

It’s almost dusk and I’ve got at least a mile more to go. I need a witness ‘cause I’m out here alone. No, what I really need is a car to roll up out of here. Maybe I should call Tim to come back, but his scary self wouldn’t even stay the first time. Oh, I can call Echo, but I could be home by the time he gets here. What should I do? I’m gonna keep walking. Awe man, but I’m out here with this dark hoodie on like I just put a target sign on my back saying, “Shoot me.” I’m not scared, though. Wait. Just get it together, Law. Get it together, man.

“Hello?”

“Hey Mama.”

“Law?”

“Yeah, it’s me.”

“I haven’t heard from you in a month of Sundays. You sound a bit winded. Are you alright?”

“Yeah. I’m fine.”

“It’s good to hear your voice son. To what do I owe this pleasure. I thought you were still mad at me.”

“No, Mom. I not mad anymore. I know you were trying to help.”

“So you know that now.”

“Yeah.”

“Thank you. That was big of you to say. So why the sudden change of heart?”

“It’s not sudden. I just haven’t said anything before now.”

“I know that, but why now?”

“No reason.”

“I know you well enough to know that you don’t just call me out of the blue, and forgive me for no good reason. What’s up, Law?”

“Nothing.”

“Boy, don’t lie to me.”

“Why I gotta be a boy? Why you call me that?”

“What? You’re my son, my boy, that’s why. What’s your problem? You’re on edge, and even more than your usual. I can hear it in your voice.”

“I’m alright.”

“No you’re not.”

“I’m fine.”

“Don’t lie to me, boy.”

“There you go again with that boy stuff! Why do I have to be your boy? Why would I need to be anybody’s boy? I’m nobody’s boy! I’m a black man and I don’t appreciate the disrespect from you or nobody else. I won’t put up with it, Shirley!”

“Excuse me? I know you’ve lost your mind now, *boy*! I birthed you into this world and you’re my son. So I can call you anything I want. What is your real problem? Tell me and tell me now!”

“I…uh. I…”

“Open up your mouth, Law.”

“Um…”

“I said, now! I can’t help you if I don’t know, and obviously you need help if you’re out of your mind enough to call me by my first name like you don’t have any sense.”

“Mama…this man called me a nigger.”

“What do you mean, a man called you a nigger?”

“Just what I said.”

“Do you mean a white man?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Law said, his voice now deflated and shallow.

“Are you serious?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Now I understand why you’re calling me. Imagine that still happening in 2020? But actually, I still can imagine that. There’s some crazy things happening in this country today.

“That shook you, though, didn’t it?”

“Yeah.”

“Why?”

“What do you mean, why? It’s not obvious?”

“I know why it would shake me up, Law, but I want to hear it out of your mouth. I think it might help you calm down if you can articulate what you really feel right now instead of taking it out on me. I know I’m your safe place, but safe doesn’t give you the right to be disrespectful to me. Especially not right now. So tell me how it made you feel.”

“I felt… I felt, disrespected.”

“The way you just made me feel, huh? Why did you feel disrespected?”

“I don’t know.”

“That’s not the answer or the real truth. Ask yourself, why did you really feel disrespected?”

“Uhh,” Law lets out a deep sigh and pause. “I guess because he made me feel bad. Like I wasn’t human. Like I wasn’t good enough for his little girl.”

“Okay, so this started over some little white girl you like, I presume. How else did it make you feel?”

“Why do you keep asking me all these questions?”

“Where are you now, Law?”

“I’m a few blocks away from this girl’s house.”

“And where is her house?”

“Mama, why does any of this matter?”

“It matters one because you haven’t given me the full story here. But more importantly, it matters because you need to go deeper with what you’re feeling and why. If it got you upset enough to call me out of the blue after not calling me for weeks, you’re really hurt. And rather than sitting with your hurt buried down deep without giving words to it, I want you to talk to me. I want you to get it out now so that it doesn’t suddenly come to the surface and you do something crazy to retaliate later. That’s why you’re down there now, Law, remember?”

Why does she always do that? How does she always do that? She flips the words I’m saying inside out trying to make me think deeper when I really don’t want to do that. I don’t see the need to do that. All I know is that this white cracker just called me out of my name and I needed someone to talk me down. Now she’s trying to get all deep in my head. I wish I didn’t call her.

“Never mind, Ma. Just forget I brought it up.”

“No, let’s not forget that you brought it up. That was a tragic and traumatic thing that happened to you. We shouldn’t ignore it. You shouldn’t ignore it.

“I’ve been taking some classes myself while you’ve been away, trying to become a better parent for you Law. And everything I keep hearing says that you need to be able to talk about your feelings with me. I just want you to know that you can. You can talk to me anytime, not just when you feel threatened and afraid.”

“I don’t feel threatened and afraid.”

“And so now you’re being prideful and stubborn. Boy how I wish you would talk to your father more.”

“There you go with that boy stuff again. And why would I call him? What can he say? What can he do? Absolutely nothing.”

“That’s not true, Law. No, he’s not perfect. He’s obviously made a lot of mistakes. But the biggest mistake he made is the one you’re repeating right now. Trying to assert his manhood in a world that doesn’t fully see him as a man. Then add some pre-prescribed obstacles in the way, and that man is headed for disaster.”

“So you’re saying Rogue being in jail right now ain’t his fault? Are you serious?”

“I’m not saying that, Law. What I’m saying is what you are about to learn the hard way, and that is that life can be so hard sometimes, especially for a young black man trying to find his way. Racism is real, Law. Systemic issues are real, Law. And until young men like yourself wake up and navigate your way out of and around these problems, you’ll end up like your father every single time. Your father isn’t a bad man. He just made some bad decisions.

“How did you react when that white man called you out of your name?”

“What do you mean?” Law asked, attempting to hide his shame.

“I mean just what I said. Did you call him a name in return? Did you curse him out? Did you hit him? How did you respond? What did you do?”

“Nothing. I did nothing. I… I just stood there for a second in silence. Then I turned and walked and way. I don’t know why I froze like that. I just…”

“You just did the right thing is what you did.”

“What was right about doing nothing?”

“Everything if you know what’s good for you. White men in the South can be just as bad as white cops harassing black kids. They think they have all the power, Law.”

“Mama, I don’t think like that. No one has that kind of power, and if they did, they don’t have that kind of power over me. I’m my own person, with my own mind, and my own words.”

“So why was your natural instinct to just stand there, be quiet, and take it?”

“I don’t know. I wasn’t expecting it, that’s all.”

“Expecting it or not, you’re not as hard core as you think yourself to be. You dress the part. Sometimes even act the part, but you’re not heartless, Law. You stood there because you have a respect for your elders no matter what they look like – black or white. You stood there because you’re a decent human being. You just stood there because it was the way you were raised, even by a now single mother and an incarcerated father. You weren’t raised by ignorant, uncivil people. You were raised by a couple who just fell on hard times and one of us took matters into his own hands the wrong way. You were raised to think that all people deserve decency and respect. So you stood there out of shock when you didn’t see it in return.

“I tried to shelter you in recent years to keep you close to me and safe, not to have you unaware of the realities in this world. Law, you need a balance of both. You need to accept the sincerity of your heart, while acknowledging the hatred that sometimes found in others. You’ve got it backwards.”

“Mama…I’m back at Cousin Mae’s house.”

“Thank God. So you’re safe.”

“Yes.”

“Good. Please call your father. Let him talk you through some of this. Or at least your Uncle John.”

“Yeah, whatever.”

“Law. Please.”

“Alright. I’ve gotta go.”

The next morning, I gladly accept a ride to school from Echo. I didn’t say much of anything last night. I didn’t want to give him the satisfaction of an, “I told you so.” The ride to the cathedral school building is quiet. His throwbacks on the radio fill the space of what would usually be our normal morning chatter. I didn’t have anything to say, not to him at least.

I hop out the truck and give him a fist bump before closing the door. I arrive twenty minutes before first period since Echo has to be at work early, but it’s perfect timing, though. I need an objective male’s point of view.

“Morning Mr. Sheldon.”

“Mr. Law, aren’t you bright and early today,” Mr. Sheldon said, looking over from his stance at the smartboard. “You’ve still got about fifteen minutes of free time before we begin.”

“I know. I was hoping to ask you something before everyone got here.”

“Oh, okay. The floor is yours, if you don’t mind me multi-tasking a bit? Or you can come back on your lunch period.”

“No, now is fine. I’ve just got one question for you.”

“Go for it, Mr.”

“Mr. Sheldon, what do you do if someone called you the N-word?”

“By the way you say that, am I right to presume you mean that this somebody was white?”

“Yes, if the someone was white…a white man.”

“I could give you my professional answer in five minutes. But I can give you a candid and raw answer during a thirty-minute lunch break.”

“I want the raw version.”  
“I thought that you would. Come back here during 6th period lunch and we’ll talk man to man.”

“Thank you, Mr. Sheldon.”

The prep bell rings. Students start to flood the halls and trickle into Mr. Sheldon’s Modern Day History class.

“Man, I didn’t know if you made it out of there or not last night,” Tim said to Law.

“Bruh, that was nothing. I spent a little time with Jilly then made my way on home before her father got there.”

“Hi Law,” Jillian leans over to say. “I’m sorry about my dad and all.”

“Don’t worry about it….”

“I thought you said you left before her father arrived,” Tim whispered.

“It’s all good.”

I can’t let either of them know what happened to me. I’m too embarrassed to say that out loud to them.

I’m trying to hold my thoughts together until I talk to Mr. Sheldon. I feel like my head’s about to explode…

“There’s a social justice professor from Nashville, Tim Wise. He’s known for his provocative and straightforward lectures on racism. He gave one in 2016 at Stetson University where he said some powerful stuff. I encourage you to Google him in your spare time. One of the things he said was, ‘Individual accomplishment doesn’t tell us anything, in and of itself, about systemic structural institutional society-wide truth. But when it comes to race, we apparently believe it does in this country.’

“What does that mean, Mr. Sheldon?”

“Mr. Law, I love that you ask questions. However, some of the questions you ask aren’t because you don’t know the answer, you’re simply trying to challenge what is true. I get that you want to see the world differently and as if you can change the world and everything in it to revolve around what works best for you. That would be ideal, for all of us.

“The truth, however, is called the truth because there are proven facts that led to it. Either there have been proven statistics, proven science, or even proven experiences that repeatedly show some thing, some phenomenon to be true.

“I would love to tell you that if a white man called me out of my name I’d act on my initial reaction. Yet life and its circumstances have taught me and other black men like me the hard way a critical fact.”

“What’s that, Mr. Sheldon?”

“That black men often don’t have the luxury of acting out on our initial reaction. Our initial reaction to things like this will likely be rage, and rightfully so. But we’ve learned the hard way that historically, and I’m talking from slavery through Jim Crow up ‘til now, or initial response can get us beaten, jailed or even killed.”

“Some stuff is worth dying for, Mr. Sheldon.”

“I hear that. I even get that. That’s why so many brothers have given their lives to advance the cause of every other black man and woman in America. At the same time, Mr. Law, we have to pick and choose our battles wisely.

“Do you think that the Civil Rights Movement would have advanced as far as it did under Dr. King, the Rev. Ralph Abernathy and others if they had taken to violence for every single violent act done towards them? Do you think we’d be where we are now if they had done that?”

“But where are we, Mr. Sheldon? Cause before coming to Nashville, all I’ve seen is black men getting beaten, killed, and jailed. My brother’s dead right now. My pop’s is in jail right now. And my cousin Tré died just a couple weeks before I transferred to this school. That’s why my mom sent me down here in the first place.”

“I’m sorry to hear of all the tragedies you’ve experienced. May I ask you a question, though?”

“Yeah.”

“Were your brother and cousin killed by a white man?”

“No. Both were killed by black dudes around our age.”

“Thank you for sharing that, which brings me to my other point. That initial response I spoke of before, that rage – you know the one I said that historically we’ve been taught not to act on with white people?”

“Yeah.”

“What do you think we end up doing with all that bottled up emotion, energy, and need to assert ourselves?”

“I don’t know. That’s what I’m trying to figure out now.”

“We internalize it. And I don’t mean just taking it out on our individual selves as single human being. No, we internalize it by instead expressing our rage and authority over other people who look just like us. We, in our twisted up way, feel like since we’re not safe acting outward, we act out by acting inward. We end up hurting folks who look just like us.”

“With all due respect, Mr. Sheldon, I know plenty of bros who hurt and steal from just as many white folks as they do from their own.”

“And I don’t doubt that you do. But that came from somewhere, and started somewhere else first. And my guess is that something was mirrored to them at home, or the lack thereof, and in turn that bro’ as you say, felt he would up the game by showing his rage at home and abroad.

“And what’s even crazier, Mr. Law, is that we don’t even realize that we are doing all of this. It starts off small, like we’re in some way minimizing the impact of their external negativity by turning it on ourselves.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Have you ever called one of your friends the N-word? Or been called that by one of your friends?”

“Yeah, but that’s different?”

“How so?”  
“Because they’re my friends. They look like me, and we have similar experiences.”

“I get that, but where do you think that come from at the beginning?”

“I don’t know.”

“I’ve given it some thought. I believe that someone, somewhere down the line thought he was taking control over that word, over that narrative, by using it with someone who looked like him. Maybe it started to mirror the control of a master over his slaves, or perhaps it was to mock the steady repetition of the word to lessen the blow of hearing it. Either way, our culture eventually took ownership of that word, almost like a term of endearment. Yet now, all of these hundreds of years since slavery began, it still hits different when we hear it from a white man.

“To me, that’s because the meaning of the word never changed Mr. Law. We just internalize it differently we it’s done amongst ourselves. The same thing holds true with crime, and violence. We cry foul when white cops come and over-police our black communities, and riddle innocent homes with bullets. But those same bullets are used in the guns of black young men just like you, killing other black young men, just like you. And the crazy thing is, in those instances, no one’s hardly crying foul except for the mother who just lost her child to gun violence.

“So now what’s the difference, Mr. Law?”

“I guess I don’t know.

“So what’s the answer for me, Mr. Sheldon? On one hand, you’re saying I shouldn’t react. Then on the other hand you’re pointing out all the crazy stuff that can happen if I react. Am I supposed to just stay silent and act like nothing ever happened? Act like that man never called me that?”

“I thought we were having a *hypothetically* conversation was about what I would do if something like this happened to *me*,” Mr. Sheldon asked rhetorically, looking at the blank yet now hurt stare in Law’s dark brown eyes, “but thank you for actually owning this scenario, Mr. Law.

“Hear me out here. I’m not suggesting that you remain silent. Perpetual silence doesn’t help. Ignoring a problem doesn’t make the problem go away. I’m also not telling you to go address him individually, presuming that you haven’t already, because nothing good comes from that at this point for you as a young man. You have too much to lose. What I am saying is to live your life in a way where you strategically choose how you react.”

“What does that look like?”

“It looks like being a person who acknowledges the truth… That racism still exists and often masks itself so well that we as blacks, especially our young brothers, have been taught to overlook it and instead be angry with ourselves. It looks like acknowledging that policies, practices, public schools, and even policing tactics are often positioned for us not to win.”

“Then why are you here teaching in a public school?”

“Because I’ve strategically chosen to be part of the solution from the inside.”

“But why here? Why not at a predominately black school where the problem is on a regular?”

“Because that’s not where the problem started. I want to address the root cause of racism by being poised and educated enough to qualify to teach at a predominately white school where young minds are still impressionable and open to developing their own opinions of the world, outside of what they may have innately been taught at home or in their own neighborhoods. I want to show these kids that they shouldn’t instinctively think of black men as their enemy, but rather as human beings who deserve dignity and respect.”

“You don’t think black kids need you more, though, man?”

“I know they do. That’s why I volunteer at my local church and community center to help them. But this right here with education is systemic, and if I can help change the tide of that system even a little bit, that’s my way of pushing against the N-word being hurled in my face every single day.

“Oh, and by the way, Mr. Wise who I told you about earlier, he’s white. He grew up immersed in black culture, at a predominately black school.

“Wait, what?”

“Yes, a white man is out there making educated arguments on behalf of black men in his predominately white academic world.

“Mr. Law, you’re blessed and fortunate to be at this school, because if there was room for you in your neighborhood school, you would’ve been once again swallowed up in the black on black systemic rage you just came from before. Since you’re here, though, make the most of it. I head up the debate team and Future Lawyers of America club. I think you might be a good fit for either one.”

“I don’t know about all of that, Mr. Sheldon.”

“Well, just think about it. You’ve got some natural raw instincts and skills that would work well. I’d teach you the rest, and you’d practice what you learn with the teams.”

“I don’t know.”

“Just think about it. In the meantime, with the situation you have at hand, you already did what many of our ancestors didn’t do, and that’s live another day. There was once a time that when that a black man being called the N-word automatically meant a target on his back and a noose around his neck. Now, live to prove him wrong.”

**Chapter 8 ~ “History of the Hood”**

I heard what Mr. Sheldon said and all, loud and clear, but now my head is racing. I think it’s racing more now than when everything actually happened. I think my brain went on mute sitting on that porch. Maybe it was nature’s way of keeping me from snapping off on that man. It was like my mind blanked out or something.

Part of me says to let it go. The other part of me wants to do what I should’ve done in the first place – handle my business. Like, what would’ve Tré done? I know what he wouldn’t have done. Stand there and take it. He probably would’ve dropped that white cracker right where he stood. Two slugs, point blank range. That’s what he would’ve done.

How could I have been so dumb? I just stood there like some kind of deaf mute who didn’t hear a word Jillian’s father said to me, and had no power to speak back to him! Just dumb. Now, I can’t get it out of my mind.

I don’t even know why I asked Mr. Sheldon for his opinion in the first place. I never would’ve done that before. What am I supposed to do with all of that stuff he said anyway? He acted like there was something I can do as one person to change how somebody else thinks. People say and do what they want to all the time. Besides, when has doing the “right thing” ever solve anything? He can talk about Dr. King and all the rest of them until he’s blue in the face. The fact of the matter is that doing the right thing got them all the same thing – killed. And if a brother’s got to go out anyway, he may as well go out trying, guns blazing.

Yeah, that’s what I need to do is get a new gat. I was trying to walk the straight and narrow on account of Mom’s wishes, and making a new start and all. But with marks like Jillian’s dad calling me out of my name like that, it’s time to let folks know who I really am. I ain’t no punk!

“Law,” Echo shouted from his truck to Law walking down the school steps in a daze. “Law, come on!”

“Oh, thanks bro. I didn’t hear you.”

“I can tell. You keep walking around with those ear buds plugged in and hood over your head all the time, I’m surprised you can still hear anything.”

“I’m used to it. I’m just kinda in my zone.”

“Get in so I can move out of this car pool lane. You and your bougie school. You know you’re spoiled, right?”

“What you mean, I’m spoiled? I didn’t ask you to come up here to get me,” Law said, hopping up into the passenger’s side. “I didn’t expect to see you until this evening. I was just gonna have Tim give me a ride home.”

“See, that’s my point right there. You always got a plan that includes somebody else doing you a favor. You’ve barely been in ‘Cashville’ two months good and already got errand boys.”

“Hey, I can’t help it that folks be drawn to me. And you volunteered to bring me to school on your own. Cousin Mae was gonna drop kick me on the bus.”

“She was right to say that.”

“So why did you step in and offer to Uber me around.”

“Because I could see you were the type that would get sucked into what you saw first and what you saw the most. And I know firsthand that some of the neighborhoods you would have road through on that bus would’ve been too much like home for you. You needed to see something different. Otherwise, you weren’t gonna stand a chance down here.”

“I would survive either way. Heck, you can drop me off in the middle of a jungle right now and I’ll figure my way out of it.”

“I know you’ve got instincts. Sometimes though, we need to make sure our instincts point in the right direction. That’s all I’m saying.”

“Dude, why you always have to sound like an old man? You sound like you need to be sitting at the spades or bid whiz table with Uncle John and ‘em. He’s always talking that old trash.”

“It ain’t no old trash. It’s common sense. It’s cool, though. You can call me an old man all you want. At least I’m not down here hiding out from my past.”

“There you go again. Why you always got to throw that jab at me? You don’t know my whole story.”

“And that’s only because you choose not to tell it. I can easily go ask Mom the whole story, ‘cause I know she knows it. Or at least enough of it to allow you to come here in a rush. But I haven’t done that out of respect. I want you to feel comfortable enough to tell me when you’re ready.”

“Thanks a lot,” Law said sarcastically. “I can always count on respect from you.”

“Look man, I’m in your corner believe it or not. I’m just trying to help. Everybody needs help sometimes. Anyway, enough of all that. Just squash it. I have to switch to the night shift at my job for the next few months starting this weekend. So they let me off early today. That’s why I was over this way.”

“What time will you be starting now?”

“I’ll need to be at work at nine at night. So I’ve got to get used to sleeping during the daytime, or at least ‘til late afternoon.”

Per our usual tit for tats, Echo and I are now riding in silence. He may think he’s right, but he’s always coming back at me with craziness. Like I can’t think for myself. I hear my own voice racing through my head already. Then even that’s on top of Mom and Uncle John, not to mention Rogue’s. I don’t need nobody else’s voice in there. It’s overcrowded as it is now.

In normal Echo form, he’s resorted to some old hip hop throwbacks on his radio. His playlist has folks in I’ve either never heard of or never listen to…A Tribe Called Quest, Boggie Down Productions, De La Soul, Public Enemy. He insists that their now fifty-year-old plus rusty selves were once the epitome of black thought and the voice of young hip hop. And once again, Echo with his old half-driving and half-preaching self, says I need to wake up my unconscious self and listen to the lyrics.

Some of what they’re saying makes sense. The other parts seem like they came straight from some land of make believe they made up in their minds. Life’s not as simple as their words want to make it seem. *Self-Destruction. Don’t Believe the Hype. Fight the Power.* That’s cute and all, but where I come from, it’s not that easy. And since I’ve been down here with white folks thinking we’re still stuck back in 1965 – I don’t know what to think. What I do know is I’ve got to figure out how to show Jillian’s dad who I really am. I lost myself for a minute. Now I’m back.

“So bro, what time you have to be at work tonight?”

“I don’t. You didn’t pay attention to nothing I said did you?”

“I was paying attention. I guess I must’ve missed that part is all.”

“Yeah. This will be my last night of regular sleep for a while. They’ve added some overnight shifts to ramp up for the holidays. I’m gonna take that on for a while. The pay is better. I gotta try to stay up later tonight to start getting used to staying up all night.”

“Oh, I get it now. What’s late for you, ten o’clock,” Law joked sarcastically. “You know old men gotta take them night meds and go to bed before the news goes off!”

“Whatever, Law. I *can* stay up late. Watch me.”

I should’ve bet money on him falling asleep before I did. Heck, he didn’t even outlast Cousin Mae. Serves him right for talking all that trash earlier. It all works for me, though. I came up to my room early to play my music, but really to send Echo off. There’s no way he’s staying up pass midnight without any incentive or company. He’s just not wired that way.

I’ve been chilling across this old double-sized bed with its orange, blue, and white patchwork quilt Cousin Mae made with the ladies down at the church. It’s nothing new about this house, let alone this room, but I could fit the space I had back home in here twice. I was invited to make myself at home here, but that’s kind of hard when every square inch is covered with someone else’s memories. It’ll do for now, though. Besides, I’d give my bedroom up back home again in a heartbeat if it meant Mom finally having a room to call her own. She does now, at least for a while.

It’s quiet in the house, which lets me know the others are finally asleep. That’s my cue to get ready. Hoodie up? Check. Jordan’s on? Backpack loaded? Check, and check. Now…to grab Echo’s keys.

I may not have a car, but I’ve been driving since I was twelve. It was the last thing Rogue taught me before he got locked up. Maybe he knew he wouldn’t be around by the time I turned sixteen. Anyway, those keys must be around here somewhere. I could just hotwire it like Tré taught me, but I don’t want to damage Echo’s truck, just use it. I think he usually leaves the keys in his work jacket pocket, and that should be on the back knob of his bedroom door. If I walk light enough, he shouldn’t hear me. Echo snores like a bear. It’s these wooden floorboards that are the real problem, though. They squeak with every three steps I take they’re so worn out.

Okay good, his door is unlocked. If I can just reach around the back of the door to his pocket… Got ‘em. I’ve gotta be quiet so the keys don’t jingle. Cousin Mae can pop up at the sound of a thin dime hitting the floor.

Whew, okay. Now to make it down these creaky stairs. Slowly… This pace is killing me. I could’ve run up and down them three times by now in the length its taking me to get to the first floor.

Finally, outside to fresh air. The one thing I can’t hardly stand down here is that their street lights are so far apart. I can barely see a thing. Let me use the actual key instead of the key fob. I don’t want to make any extra noises that may wake them up. I should keep the headlights off too, just until I pull away from the house.

Man, his old ass engine sounds like a bunch of rocks when it turns over. I’ve got to back out slowly because even their gravel driveway makes noises. Okay…almost backed up enough. I can feel the back tires moving to a smoother surface. Almost, almost… And finally, paved road.

I figure I’ll pay Mr. Cracker a visit tonight. This may be the only chance I’ll get since Echo will be working nights soon and have his truck with him. I need to let Jillian’s dad get a taste of the Chi. We don’t play that mess where I come from. Hell, I don’t play that. I found a couple old cans of spray paint in Cousin Mae’s yard shed. I figure that and a few rolls of tissue ought to be enough for now, until I get my hands on some steel for backup. I wonder if Tim knows where I can get a piece around here. I should go over there, guns blazing on his ass. Man I wish Tré was still here. He’d roll up on that fool with me in a heartbeat. Then, if Tré was still here, I wouldn’t be in Nashville in the first place. None of this would’ve even happened. I can’t go backwards now, though.

If I drive towards the school, I’ll remember from there how to get to Jillian’s house. It was literally on the other side of the train tracks, just past the football field. I think Tim took a left turn right about here… Yeah, I’m coming up on the neighborhood now. I can see the Confederate flags in some of their front yards. Now which house was it? That’s it. There it is right up there. Let me drop my headlights again. Yep, that’s the one. I’ll never forget his corny white Dodge truck.

“Good morning, Law.”

“Morning Cousin Mae.”

“How’d you sleep? I slept just fine,” Law said curtly.

“There’s some grits and bacon ready for you on the stove if you’re hungry. You can pop a couple slices of bread in the toaster yourself.”

“I’m good with that. Thanks,” Law said, grabbing a plate from Mae’s glass inset cabinets.  
“Echo’s sleeping in today. He’s got to switch up his sleep patterns for his job a while. I can take you by the school since he’s got you used to catching a ride each day. Or you can hop on the bus if that makes more sense.”

“I don’t want to put you out of your way. I can take a bus today.”

“A bus, really?”

“Yes, really. Contrary to popular belief around here, I’m actually not a car baby. I took public transportation at home for years. It just got to a point where Mom thought it wasn’t safe no more after my brother got killed. So I started getting rides.”

“Oh I’m sorry, baby. I didn’t mean any harm.”

“None taken. I’m just letting you know I’m not lazy. I just don’t see a problem accepting gifts.”

“Understood. Then it’s no trouble at all. You’re not taking me out of my way. I need to go by the grocery store anyway. I may as well go sooner rather than later.”

“I’ll take the bus today.”

“No, I insist. We haven’t had much time just the two of us since you’ve been here. I don’t want your mother thinking I turned you over to the wolves down here.”

“By that do you mean made me fend for myself? If so, Cousin Mae, you made that known on day one that you were not my Mama.”

“I didn’t mean that in a bad way. I was just really getting to know you was all, and I didn’t want you coming down here getting yourself into any trouble because you didn’t have any rules.”

“Oh, I’m clear. You didn’t want me coming starting any trouble for you,” Law said sarcastically.

“I did not say that. You’re taking my words out of context.”

“No worries, Cousin. I heard you loud and clear.”

“Law, if you don’t finish eating so we can go! I don’t want to hear another word about it.”

I have to admit it. I gave Cousin Mae a hard time on purpose. One, because I was just in the mood to; two, because it’s nothing like creating a good diversion to avoid a suspicion. I noticed that I parked the truck about five feet shy of where Echo usually parks it. I don’t need his mom seeing that and asking a bunch of questions. So far, so good.

I take a few minutes longer to scoop up the rest of my grits with the grape jam covered toast. I don’t get breakfast from Mom at home, well, not a hot one. I may as well take advantage of every perk that comes my way.

“Come on, Law. Let’s get you off to school. How do you like it?” Mae asked, looking in her purse and throughout the kitchen for her car keys.

“It’s alright I guess.”

“Hmm… I can’t seem to find my keys. Well, I don’t want to mess around and make you late. Let me instead grab Echo’s truck keys from his jacket pocket. I won’t be going too far for him to miss me.”

Oh man, did I put them back in the right pocket?

“Okay, found them. Let’s go. That boy snores so loud. He needs to get that checked out. He’ll sleep through anything.”

Whew! Crises avoided. We walk out the door into the crisp November air down the steps, and towards Echo’s Ford. Thanksgiving is just a couple weeks away. I guess I have to spend it here this year, but I can’t worry about all of that now. We both hop in and pull the doors shut, Mae simultaneously cranking over the loud engine.

“Hmm, that’s weird.”

“What’s weird?”

“Echo only has a quarter tank of gas. His dad taught him to never let it get below a half tank, and he usually sticks to that religiously.”

“Oh. Maybe he forgot to fill it up yesterday,” Law said, thinking quick on his feet. “He was pretty focused on getting back home to chill.”

“Hmm…maybe.”

Cousin Mae asks me a few random questions about school, but honestly I barely hear a word that she’s saying. It all sounds like Mr. Spence’s home room lecture voice back home. I’m half holding my breath, half rethinking everything I did last night. Did I readjust his driver’s seat? What about the mirrors? And how could I forget about the gas? If she doesn’t notice anything else strange, I’m surely not gonna be the one to point it out by default. Besides, I’d only be confirming something to her she thinks about me…that I’m a trouble maker. I don’t make trouble. Trouble finds me. I’m just the type not to back down whenever it comes knocking! I can’t back down. We’re almost there. If I can hold my position another few blocks, it will be like none of this ever happened. Neither of them will ever know I used the truck or did what I had to do.

“Okey doke. Here we are. Most kids in our neighborhood don’t get the chance to go here, but you do. Make the most of it, Law.”

“Thanks.”

“Call if you need me to come pick you up later.”

“We’ll do.”

I’d usually be embarrassed if Mom dropped me off and picked me up every day from school. Somehow though here, it’s almost expected. Like you’re less than if you’re not a part of the car pool. It doesn’t matter now. Let me just get this day going.

“Good morning everyone. Let’s settle in,” Mr. Sheldon said to his Modern History class. “We have a new topic today. It may seem a bit controversial, but given current events, I think it would be a disservice if I didn’t unpack this subject with you.

“I’m going to run down a few scenarios for us to chew on…

“August 9, 2014, Michael ‘Mike’ Brown, is shot by a police officer in Ferguson, Missouri eight times. The police department left his body in the street, uncovered for about an hour, and still in the lying in the street nearly five hours later. The police officer involved, Darren Wilson, was never made to give a written statement of his account or recorded. He simply said Mike and another young man, Dorian Johnson, were walking down the middle of the street. That was his reason for engaging with him in the first place. ‘Hands up, don’t shoot became the cry of the protestors.’”

On October 20, 2014, Laquan McDonald, is shot by Chicago police officers sixteen times. SAY MORE…

Then there’s Walter Scott, Philando Castile, Breonna Taylor, on and on.

“Today we’re going to look at police brutality on blacks, especially teen boys and the history of policing in America.”

“That’s dope, Mr. Sheldon,” Law chimed in unannounced. “I’m here for it all day.”

“Thank you for cosigning, Mr. Law, but I’ll take it from here.”

“I could go on and on about what’s happened to folks who look like me, Mr. Law, Mr. Tim, and a others throughout this prestigious school. And I’m not talking about back in the 1960s. This is just in the last nine years. That’s right now, in our lifetime.

“So let me pose a question. Do white officers have a racial bias against blacks? If so, why do we think so? Or if you think differently, what do you think and why?

“Who wants to kick off the group discussion?”

“I will, Mr. Sheldon,” Jillian said, proudly raising her hand.

“Even when there’s proof against the police, they still get away with it,” Jillian said. “They have more respect for a dead dog! I think our textbook said there was another case in 2014 with a dog named Vern. The dog was killed by a police officer in Chesapeake got more justice than some of the black people you named. I think that, unfortunately, some of us, especially our police officers are victims of white privilege. Some of us just don’t know any better.”

“You can miss me with that, *Jilly*!” Law said defiantly.

“Dang, man. Sounds like trouble in paradise,” Tim whispered over to Law from his seat.

“That just sounds like some lame excuse for being a racist,” Law added aloud.

“Mr. Law, I respect your candor, but let’s also respect that there are views on both sides of the table,” Mr. Sheldon interjected.

“Yeah, but hers is wrong.”

“I know that your name makes you think you have a lock on the law in all matters. However, allow me to guide our group discussion so we all can judge who’s right or wrong here.

“Yes, there is a such thing as what mainstream calls, white privilege, where whites benefit from being what society would deem as the ruling majority. There’s also something called implicit racial bias, where we unconsciously favor the views of our own race and culture because that’s the only experience we personally know. Then there’s blatant hatred and racism where a person is fully aware of the decisions being made and why.

“I think part of our responsibility in our world now is to determine when to show grace towards someone behaving inappropriately towards a race of other people, and when to take a stance towards changing the behavior all together.”

“Mr. Sheldon, what do you believe? Law asked candidly. “And I don’t want to hear what you feel you’ve got to tell me out of this textbook. Like for real, what do you think?”

“Personally, I believe there’s a time for showing grace and there’s a time for taking a stand just like I said. What I leave up to each of you to determine is what makes sense for you and when.

“Let me give the class an example. It’s an extreme example, mind you, but I want everyone to feel how extreme this subject can go.

“So, one of my associates is a psychology professor and she’s working on a thesis to find the subliminal connection between the KKK hoods that white supremacists wear to assert their power, authority, and mystique and the hoods that our black brothers wear to protect their power, authority, and mystique,” Mr. Sheldon said.

“Well, blacks and Latinos aren’t the only ones who were hoodies. We wear them, too,” Jillian said. “So I don’t see why we’d narrow it down to race.”

“Because race matters in America, that’s why,” Law said, in a brief moment of self-discovery. “If it didn’t matter, why did ole’ boy get shot down by a neighbor for walking around his own neighborhood while wearing one?”

“Old boy, as you call him Mr. Law, was Trayvon Martin. Mr. Martin was about your age when he was killed by a neighbor who suspected him of ill intent. He was staying in his father’s gated community and was carrying a bag of Skittles and a pop. It happened in Florida, I believe in 2012. Thank you for sharing that observation, Mr. Law.

“Let’s all take a look at the history of policing in America,” Mr. Sheldon continued. “Policing can be traced back to the early colonial days in part to the Slave Patrols of the 1700s. They started in in the Carolinas, our neighboring states. Slave Patrols were used to capture runaway slaves and suppress slave rebellions.

“Agencies such as the NAACP, or the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People for those who may not know, says that our modern-day ‘tough on crime’ laws have put an unprecedented number of non-violent offenders behind bars. Meanwhile black neighborhoods feel no more secure than before. The NAACP says this is because our current policing system has what it calls, ‘deep roots in slavery.’

“The NAACP also reports that the mission of Slave Trades was, and I quote, “to establish a system of terror and squash slave uprisings with the capacity to pursue, apprehend, and return runaway slaves to their owners. Tactics included the use of excessive force to control and produce desired slave behavior.’ They even were sworn in under oath, just like new officers are today.

“Specifically, North Carolina’s Slave Patrol Oath stated, ‘I [the patroller's name], do swear, that I will as searcher for guns, swords, and other weapons among the slaves in my district, faithfully, and as privately as I can, discharge the trust reposed in me as the law directs, to the best of my power. So help me, God.’

“The part that strikes me most about this oath is the phrase, ‘as privately as I can.’ I’m under the belief that maybe, just maybe this is a connecting dot to the white hooded robes worn by the Ku Klux Klan.’

“So how did the KKK emerge? Historians say there was an evolution of Slave Trade policing…,” Mr. Sheldon said.

“Mr. Tim, will you read the excerpt from the NAACP’s website that I just pulled up on the smart board?”

“Sure thing, Mr. Sheldon.

“Slave Patrols continued until the end of the Civil War and the passage of the 13th Amendment. Following the Civil War, during Reconstruction, slave patrols were replaced by militia-style groups who were empowered to control and deny access to equal rights to freed slaves. They relentlessly and systematically enforced Black Codes, strict local and state laws that regulated and restricted access to labor, wages, voting rights, and general freedoms for formerly enslaved people.

“In 1868, ratification of the 14th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution technically granted equal protections to African Americans — essentially abolishing Black Codes. Jim Crow laws and state and local statutes that legalized racial segregation swiftly took their place.

“Should I read the next section under ‘A Continued Bias,’ too?”

“Yes, please continue.”

“The criminal justice system is heavily impacted by the bias of police mentality and outdated judicial precedents. The system is largely driven by racial disparities and the Black community continues to be a target. The results are brutal and long lasting.

“By the 1900s, local municipalities began to establish police departments to enforce local laws in the East and Midwest, including Jim Crow laws. Local municipalities leaned on police to enforce and exert excessive brutality on African Americans who violated any Jim Crow law. Jim Crow Laws continued through the end of the 1960s.

“There’s also a quote here from The Atlantic. Read that, too?”

“Yes, Mr. Tim.”

“All cruelty begins with dehumanization – not seeing the face of the other, not seeing the whole humanity of the other. A cultural regime of dehumanization has been constructed in many police departments. In that fertile ground, racial biases can spread and become entrenched.”

“Thank you for reading for us, Mr. Tim.”

“Mr. Sheldon?”

“Yes, Mr. Tim.”

“This sounds to me like…”

“That’s a very sound observation…”

“Mr. Sheldon,” a voice interrupts from the unexpected classroom speaker. “Mr. Sheldon?”

“Yes, I’m here. The whole class is here. What can I do for you?”

“Can you send Lawrence Davis down to the principal’s office immediately?”

“Well, we’ve only got another fifteen minutes or so left. Can it wait?”

“I was told that he’s needed right away.”

“Fine then. Mr. Law, please gather your belongings. Take this hall pass, too,” Mr. Sheldon said, quickly signing his initials to a small green slip of paper.

“Walking the Green Mile,” one student blurted out as a joke.

“Bring it back in focus class,” Mr. Sheldon corrected. “Thank you for your participation today, Mr. Law. See you tomorrow.”

I take the long way down. Looping through the opposite flight of stairs, hoping to minimize the time I spend in the principal’s office between class periods. I get there only to see that racist piece of trash again. It’s Jillian’s father. He came because there was graffiti spray painted on his beautiful Dodge truck and toilet paper spread across his front lawn. He’s arguing with Principal Grier that he saw a black young man wearing a black hoodie from his Ring camera. He’s convinced that it’s me.

Because of his notoriety in the community, she goes along with it at first and lets him to ask me if that’s me in the video. Of course I said, no. What else would I say to him? To her for that matter? I’ve just got to stay calm. Don’t feed the conversation. Let him take the heat. Stay calm.

“It looks like he drove an old Ford truck, but I can’t make out the plates from this angle of the film. It was too dark.”

“So if it’s too dark to see the person’s face, he was wearing a hood, and you couldn’t make out the license plates, what makes you so convinced that it was Mr. Davis?”

“Well let’s just say we had a run in of sorts,” Mr. Bruce replied.

“Yeah, you got that right,” Law said, stopping short of saying exactly what happen for fear it may give reasonable cause for his accusations. “And besides, you’re not the cops. I’m not under arrest, so you don’t have a right to question me like this, especially without my guardian being present.”

“Oh so you’re a smart little…,” Mr. Bruce said, stopping himself in mid-sentence.

“Little smart what? Go on. A little smart what?”

“This isn’t the end of this. Just know that much.”

“Well Mr. Bruce thank you for your time and expressing your concerns. We’ll look into it further,” Principal Grier said. “Law, I’ll be calling your guardian so we can get to the bottom of this.”

“I want him expelled from this school! He doesn’t deserve to be here or anywhere my tax paying dollars go, or my Jilly,” Mr. Bruce said.

“There it is, finally,” Law interjected. “You don’t think I’m good enough for your daughter.”

“Mr. Davis, please refrain from speaking right now.

“Mr. Bruce, I understand your frustration, and as I said, we will contact Lawrence’s guardian and get to the bottom of this entire matter. You have my word.”

“You better,” Mr. Bruce said to the principal. “And as for you, young man, you haven’t heard the last from me.”

“Oh, so now I’m a young man,” Law said defiantly. “Boy please…”

“Lawrence Davis, please excuse yourself to the waiting area before I have to give you a detention.”

“That’s the least of what he needs!” Mr. Bruce chimed in again.

“Who does he think he is, coming in here accusing me of stuff when it’s you!”

“Mr. Davis, please! Remove yourself from my office and sit in the waiting room until I call your home.”

“I want to be here when you do.”

“Mr. Bruce, I’m afraid that’s not best at this moment. I bent the rules a bit allowing you to ask a few questions. I’m going to have to ask you to leave now. Again, we will handle this matter.”

“This isn’t over young man!”

I don’t give a damn about that man. He had it coming, and if I had my way, it would’ve been worse. He caught me off guard the first time we met. This time, I had something for him. He must’ve lost his mind thinking he could come at me like that. He can’t prove nothing with no grainy doorbell camera. And even if he could, it was worth it. He got what he deserved.

Now how do I explain this to Cousin Mae, ‘cause I know Principal Grier is calling her now. Oh man. How do I explain this to Mom, ‘cause I know Mae’s gonna call her next?

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I survived the home front chastisement pretty well. I admitted *most* of what I did to Cousin Mae and Mom. They went a little bit easier on me when I told them why I did it in the first place. I even told Mom that was why I called her that day out the blue – so she could talk me down.

Echo’s not speaking to me now, though. I guess when Principal Grier told Cousin Mae about the Ford truck parked in front of the man’s house, he assumed everything to be true.

I’m just keeping quiet for now. I’ve had enough drama for one day. We ate dinner apart and in silence tonight. Cousin Mae usually has a rule about eating together at the kitchen table. No phones, no TV for one hour. It’s been her way of helping us all talk and bond. I guess I may have broken things up a bit. Maybe that’s why.

We each sleep through the night, although a bit restless for me. The next day after breakfast, Cousin Mae offers to take me to school instead of Echo, on account of his work schedule yes, but also his silence.

She finds her car keys this time without a problem, and opens the front door as I circle back for a piece of fruit. No hot breakfast today. That’s when I hear her scream to the top of her voice.

“Echo!”

There was a noose hanging from the center arbor of the front porch.

**Chapter 9 ~ Not Far from the Tree**

“What’s wrong, Mama?” Echo said, running and startled out of his sleep.

“Look!” Mae said, her shaking hand pointing at the braided and looped rope.

There it is clear as day. A noose hanging from the top of her porch. I can hardly believe it myself. It’s got to be a prank.

“Who put that there? Is this some kind of joke?” Echo asked, rubbing sleep from his eyes.

“I was just thinking the same thing, man. But why would someone play a joke like that. That’s not funny.”

“I don’t know who, but I bet I can guess why,” Echo said, tension clearly building in his voice.

“Well…why?”

“Law, I don’t know why you keep playing games.”

“What are talking about, Echo?”

“Somebody probably didn’t think it was funny that you spray painted their truck, ‘white cracker’ or that you trashed their yard with toilet paper either.”

“Come on, bruh, you don’t think Jillian’s father would do this, do you?”

“Do it himself? No. He wouldn’t have to, he knows enough people to do something just to get back at you and to scare us.”

“Man, people don’t do that type of stuff anymore. It’s 2023.”

“Then why was it just on the news the other night that Nashville is becoming a battleground for hate groups. Law, the KKK was formed in this state. Right here in Tennessee. You think it died off the day you arrived? Hell naw! It’s alive and well. And now, you got some of ‘em bold enough to not hide behind no more. What’s wrong with you!”

“Dude you sound all nervous, like it’s 1960 in this mug. Calm down.”

“Calm down? You’re too calm! You come down here stirring up stuff you don’t know nothing about. Then walk around like some dumb Steve Urkel…’Did I do that?’”

“Hey, wait a minute, Echo,” Mae interrupted, finally catching her composure. “We don’t know that this isn’t a prank and we don’t know for sure who did it or why?”

“Okay, Mama, so you’re in La La Land, too. You know exactly who and why.”

“Go take it down, Echo.”

“No. Make Law take it down. It’s his fault it’s up there in the first place.”

“Alright, alright man, chill out. I’ll take it down,” Law said, reaching for the folded step stool that rests behind kitchen door. “It’s no big deal.”

“We need to call the cops.”

“What good is that gonna do, Mama? They probably saw it up there before you did and drove right by.”

“Don’t be like that, Echo. I taught you better than that. We can’t hate them even if some of them still hate us.”

“And Dad taught me better than that, too. He taught me the truth, and the truth ain’t always as pretty as the law says it is in black and white.”

“Regardless, I still want to file a report.”

“Then Law don’t touch it yet. Let the cops see the truth and decide what law they’ll throw our way this time.

“Look like there’s a note,” Law said, having stepped out onto the porch for a closer look. “It’s in this Ziploc bag.”

“What does it say?” Echo asked sternly. “Hand it to me,” snatching it from Law’s hand.

“Echo, what is it?” Mae asked.

“Mama, it’s a sketch of a hooded man on a horse. It reads, ‘You have been paid another social visit by the Old Glory Knights of the Ku Klux Klan. We have a dark history here and because of you a bright future! Be warned.’”

“Oh…my…God,” Mae said. “Never in my life have I seen something like this.”

“Now do you have any more questions, Mom? Do you doubt it now? They may as well have said the next time you’ll see a noose; it will be hanging on a tree with somebody attached to it!”

“Maybe I should catch the bus today, since the cops need to come here. I don’t want to hold things up,” Law quietly interjects.

“Oh, so you can run off and do another getaway? I don’t think so!”

“Echo? What’s gotten into you, son? I’ve never seen you act this way.”

“And you’ve never seen a noose and a KKK note on your porch either, have ya?”

“Law. Echo can take you to school. I’ll stay and wait for the police.”

“Mama, I don’t want you here at the house by yourself. Not until we know what’s really happening here.”

“Well, I don’t want Law out there by himself. What if it is some kind of retaliation? He doesn’t need to be roaming about alone.”

“He’s not a kid. He just acts like one when it’s convenient.”

“Echo, please. Just throw on something and drop him off for me. The police probably won’t arrive until you’re on your way back anyway.”

“He’s right. I’m not a kid. I’ll get there on my own.”

“Not today you won’t,” Mae insisted. “All I need is this over my head if something goes wrong with you. Your mother sent you to me to keep you safe, and that’s what I’m going to do.”

I know he don’t want me in his truck. I know he doesn’t hardly like me, but it’s all good. I’m gonna handle my business and resolve all of this. I’ve been playing nice guy long enough. I’m gonna talk to Tim about where I can find a piece. He won’t have one, but he’s ‘bout it enough to tell me where to go for sure.

Our ride is completely silent. No words. Not even any corny old hip hop. I hop out before he pulls into the drop off lane, give him a nod, hood up, and start walking towards the school steps.

“Yo’ Law, wait up,” Tim calls out from behind, having just parked. “What’s up, man?”

“I’m alright,” Law said dryly. “Hey, question for you?”

“Yeah?”

“Who do I talk to if I want to buy a piece?”

“You talkin’ about a .45 or .357 type of piece, right?”

“Yeah, fool, a gun.”

“I just wanna be clear… Why?”

“Don’t worry about all that. I just need to be prepared is all.”

“What happened in Principal Grier’s office? I didn’t see you no more all day.”

“Bruh, you sure got a lot of questions for someone who didn’t answer my one.”

“Oh yeah. You’d need to talk to one of the seniors about that. Man and his crew get down like that.”

“Man?”

“Yeah, that’s what everybody calls him ‘cause he’s already on some grown man mess even in high school. He’s just low key about his stuff. Real smart like.”

“Alright, bet.”

“You sure that’s what you want to do?”

“Yeah, I’m sure.”

“Then I’ll introduce you after school. Just meet me in the parking lot.”

“So how do you know him well enough to introduce me? Last I checked, you were too scary to even stay in Jillian’s neighborhood with me.”

“That’s because I ain’t stupid.”

“Well I ain’t scared.”

“Neither am I. Anyway, I grew up with Man. He and my brother were friends. I was just a shorty though, so I didn’t run with him like that, but I know him.”

“Alright, then hook me up.”

“I got you.”

By the end of the week I am able to swap the few dollars Mom sends me here and there, for a decent piece. It’s basic, but I got it souped up to a semi-automatic. It’s not like I’ve been spending money on some chicken head, and there’s nothing much here for me to do that requires money other than get high. But I promised Tré I would never use my own product. Seen it mess up too many folks. So, I’ve been saving Mom’s stash for something big. This will be worth every dollar.

I can’t take Echo’s truck this time. It caused too much confusion, and I almost got caught. Plus, he drove it to work. This time, one of Man’s dudes will drive me over there and wait for me at the train tracks. That way, I can slip in, do what I need to do, then run those couple blocks back to my getaway car. This way everyone in Man’s little crew won’t know all my business.

I figure, like my old Sunday School teacher would say, an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. You scare me. I scare you.

I wait a few days, so no one hears of the craziness at Jillian’s house and assumes it was because of me. I had a lot of random folks walking up to me, asking questions and stuff after I got called on the loud speaker to Principal Grier’s office. I guess all of a sudden I’m popular. Or maybe it’s because Jillian’s father is and made such a commotion about what he claimed I did to his property. He claimed a lot of stuff, just couldn’t prove none of it. Serves him right, too.

I also wait until Cousin Mae falls asleep. I don’t want to wake her. She doesn’t need to be in the middle of any more of this than she already is now. And Echo, he’s on the night shift tonight at the plant. So as long as I’m back before daybreak, all is well.

One of Man’s boys just scooped me up right before midnight. I want to make sure those good ole’ wholesome suburban folks are sound asleep before I get there…then blaze their whole house. They’ll never see me coming.

“Yeah, bruh. Let me out right up there away from the street light. Give me about fifteen minutes. I should be back by then. And don’t bother trying to look for me, just stay right here so I’ll know where to find you exactly.”

I think I thought everything through, but still my heart is racing.

“Thanks, and like I said, give me about fifteen minutes.”

“Got it.”

Hood up? Check. Glock set? Check. I’m only five or six houses away. Most of the porch lights are off, and unlike the city, they’re street lights are spaced out so far you can hardly see anyone walking down the street, let alone make out their faces. And with it being a quarter pass midnight on a school night, it’s lights out on the whole block, which is perfect for me.

There’s that honkey’s white Dodge now. I pull back the safety, aim, and let of at least five to seven rounds in the truck and across the front porch. I take off running back to old boy’s car, ‘cause now a neighbor’s porch light clicks on across the street. My heart is pounding. Adrenaline racing. I’m breathing so hard by the time I reach him, I can barely grab the door handle drop in the passenger’s seat and say, “Drive!”

Dude pulls off, tires screeching. The only thing he asks me the whole ride is, “Where to?”

“Back to my crib.”

The next day I went to school like nothing ever happened. Man saw me across the hall in between classes and only nodded as if to say, “Good doing business with you.” He and I both know we can never speak about last night. At least we shouldn’t. Real men don’t need extra words to handle things.

I wasn’t pulled from any classes today. No principal’s office. No nothing. Matter of fact, Jillian didn’t even come to school today neither did her brother. I just hear a little buzz that there was an attempted robbery at their house last night. Rumors are so silly. You can count on people getting only ten percent of the story right, one hundred percent of the time. Part of me wants to set the record straight, but that would be amateur and immature. That’s not how I roll. I know how to handle my business.

Cousin Mae cooks us dinner and we all sit down to eat it before Echo takes off for work. She’s a pretty good cook. So I don’t mind so much her rule about family dinner time. It makes her feel like she’s keeping a promise to my Mom.

Things are quiet for the few days at school and at home. It’s Friday, so Tim and I decide to stay after school for the game and hang out afterwards. I notice Jillian on the sidelines. I guess she decided not to cheer today. Who knows. I’m halfway looking for her Mr. Bruce in the stands because her brother’s still playing. Then the other part of me wants to make sure that if he is here, we never connect. I don’t know if I can poker face with him after all of this.

I get to the crib in time to tell Cousin Mae good night and then binge watch some old episodes of Law and Order on my phone. I must be tired ‘cause I’m nodding across the bed with my street clothes and gym shoes still on.

“Law. Law?” Cousin Mae calls out from the bedroom hallway. “Do you smell that?”

“Huh? Umm…,” clearing his throat. “Smell what?”

“It smells like burning wood.”

“Maybe you left the fireplace going.”

“Wake up, Law. I don’t have a fireplace.”

“Oh, that’s right. Then I don’t know.”

“Come with me downstairs so we can check things out.”

“Okay.”

“Boy, you still got your clothes and shoes on.”

“I know. I must have fallen asleep.”

“Obviously,” Mae said, leading the decent of the stairs to the first floor. “What’s that glowing light? Where’s it coming from?”

“What light, Cousin Mae?”

“Walk down a few more stairs and you’ll see what I’m talking about…”

All of a sudden she lets out a scream like nothing I’ve ever heard before. It was the sound some people make when they see death.

“What’s wrong!”

“Oh my…God,” she said, trying to cover her mouth with both hands.

There before us, just beyond the few feet of floor space and the concrete walls and framed picture glass stood a burning cross in Cousin Mae’s front yard. Blazing bright for all to see. She was horrified. No Echo. No husband. Just me, and I… I don’t know what to do.

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The noose hanging on Cousin Mae’s front porch was enough. Now this?

No one could’ve ever told me that in 2023 I’d wake up to a cross burning in my cousin’s front yard. I would’ve said they were lying, hallucinating, or having a bad dream. Or maybe I was having a bad dream, right?

“Call the fire department! Call the police! Call somebody, Law! Oh my God, call somebody!” Mae was caught between wailing and the silence people keep to trick an intruder into thinking there’s no one home. No one to rob. No on to kill.

“Law, don’t just stand there, do something! You need to wake up! This is real life. Right here, outside this window. This is real…

“What have you done to draw *this* to my home? Tell me! Tell me now!” Mae said, now squeezing Law’s arms and shaking him to reality.

“I… I…”

“Open your mouth and wake up!”

“I’m calling your Mom. You’ve got to go. I can’t take this. I can’t take this! I was trying to help you. I was trying to give you another chance, and another chance, but you keep bringing danger to my home. It’s like you’re hell bent on destroying yourself and everyone else around you. People have tried to give you support and help and love and you keep pissing on it.

“You act like the hole in your heart is so deep nothing and nobody will ever be able to fill it up. Well I’m convinced that you don’t want it filled up. You want to wallow in nothingness. That, that you can do on your own back in Chicago, because I’ve had it! Now move out of my way!”

Why do I do that? Why do I think I’m doing the right thing, cause trouble, then get stuck like a deer in headlights when it’s time to fix things? I don’t know what to do.

“After 911, I’m calling your mother and Uncle John, ‘cause somethings got to give.”

**Chapter 10 ~ A New Creed of Law**

The fire department came out right away to extinguish the flaming cross. I never thought I’d see anything like this in my life. I only saw pictures in books or on TV. I didn’t think it was real. I didn’t think it connected to me today. I guess I was wrong.

The police came too, to take a report for a hate crime and also harassment on account of the noose incident before. My Cousin Mae is still a nervous wreck and I don’t know what all Mom said to her, but she agreed to let me stay to finish out my junior year.

Part of the deal of me staying is weekly calls to my father in prison. I guess he wants me scared straight. Then I have to join some sort of community service group or afterschool program to keep myself occupied. And I have to take the school bus and go to Cousin Mae’s church at least once a month. Echo still hasn’t said a word to me, and it’s been a week.

I could skip town and say bump this to all of it, but my Mom is torn up about all of this. She’s worried about me, and embarrassed to have Cousin Mae in the middle of my mess. So for Mom, I’ll try…again.

The house phone rings on a Sunday afternoon.

“Hello,” Mae answers, pausing as she hears the automatic voice on the other end.

“You have a collect call from…Dixon Prison. Do you accept the charges?”

“Yes.”

“Hello?” Rogue said, not sure if he dialed the number Sheila gave him correctly.

“Bill, is that you?”

“Yeah, Mae, it’s me. How you doing?”

“I’m doing alright. It’s good to hear your voice. It’s been a long time.”

“Yes, it has been.”

“Well time is money, and I know you’re calling to talk to your son. So I won’t hold you from it.”

“Thank you for allowing me to call collect.”

“No, thank you for offering to help. Hold on a minute. I’ll get him to the phone.

“Law,” Mae calls out from the kitchen. “Your father’s on the phone. Hurry up!”

“Hello?”

“Law?”

“Yeah.”

“What’s going on? I sent you down there to save you, and it seems you’ve just made things worse. What happened?”

“Dad…they burned a cross in front of Mae’s house!”

“Oh, so now I’m good enough to be called your Dad, when your mouth wrote a check that your butt can’t cash,” Rouge said.

“I don’t have much time, so I’ll get right to it. Law, stop trying to be hard. You’re not hard. You’re not even good at it.

“I share a cell block with mofos in here who would have dropped that white man where he stood as soon as the first syllable of nigger dropped out of his mouth! And would’ve done it at point blank range. In broad day light. Point blank. Period. They wouldn’t have flinched or stood there dumbfounded, having to take days to come up with some lame ass comeback like you did. It would’ve been second nature to them. You’re not that person, Law. You’re different.

“Your mother and I weren’t perfect. And I messed a lot of things up for you, for all of us. I’ve admitted that over and over again. But what I won’t take the blame for is you choosing to do things other than what I taught you to do, who we both taught you to be. We raised you to be different. To stand on your own two feet. To have your own opinions and voice in the world. But for some reason, you keep using my mistakes as your excuse to not be your best self.

“Me and your Mom aren’t gonna keep bouncing you from state to state, house to house trying to save your life. I can’t keep protecting you from yourself. You’re your own worst enemy, and I can’t stop you from destroying your life if you’re hell bent on doing it. All I can tell you now is think of the heartbreak this is causing your mother. It’s selfish. Stupid. It’s time to grow up and stop using me, your brother, or anybody else as your excuses.

“I’m not bailing you out of this one. It’s time for you to stand up and take responsibility like a man and figure this all out, and not with a gun, but with the good common sense I put in you. Now use it!”

“No he didn’t just yell at me like that and then hang up!”

“What are you talking about,” Echo said, just happening to walk in the kitchen as Law’s call ends.

“Oh, so now you remember how to speak,” Law clapped back.

“You know what… I’ve had enough of your smart mouth. You’re all talk and stupid actions.

“I was trying to respect your privacy and give you the chance to tell me your full story yourself. But sense you don’t respect me, you don’t respect my car, I don’t have to respect you. I had Mom tell me everything you did to get shipped all the way down here.

“You’re out here running for your life for some crazy mess you started with people who look just like you. Then you turn around in start trouble down here, too. The way I see it, you’re the common factor in both problems. It’s you. You call me slow, but you’re the one caught up in the game and don’t even know the rules. The world doesn’t revolve around Law.

“Rather than steal my truck to do your dirty work, you need to get a job. I tried being nice to you. I tried treating you like family, but you stabbed me in the back. Then on top of that, you bring all this drama to my Mom’s house. We have to still live here when you’re gone.

“Do you know why I was raised in Nashville and not Chicago, Law?”

“No.”

“I know you don’t and you never even bothered to ask. Mom moved us down here when I was seven years old because my Dad was murdered up there.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“Yeah, by two men who robbed him. One was black, the other was white. Do you think she was any angrier at one than the other? No, she wasn’t, ‘cause at the end of the day, they both did the same thing. They took her husband’s life. So for Mom, two wrongs don’t make a right. It didn’t add up. Both were equally hurtful, and neither one could be justified.

“The way I see it, Law, you’re selfish, childish, and clueless. Like you can justify crazy when you’re doing it, but when it’s done to you then suddenly it’s wrong.

“You’ always in the passenger seat of my truck talkin’ trash. When are you gonna to get in the driver’s seat of your own life? Every time I see you, bruh, you’ve finagled your way into someone else’s passenger side trying to be a boss when you don’t even have permission to drive!

“Then you’ down here all mad at what this white man done to you, when if you ask me, you were in your precious Chi-Town doing the same thing! Only difference, yours is worse because your hate is for your own people. Taking from ‘em. Shooting at ‘em. Selling dope to ‘em. And don’t give me that crap about it being a dog eat dog world. Nobody told you to buy into that lie. You did that to yourself.

“You down here mad at white people. Meanwhile, back home you’ up there doing exactly what they taught us to do. Hate yourself! Hate and take from any and everybody who hardly got anything, just like you.

“They trained us to hate ourselves, Law. So every time we hurt “ourselves,” we’re walking out exactly what they taught us to do… whether it shows up in the form of the house nigger vs. the field nigger, or the Crypts vs. the Bloods. It’s all the same difference. And at the end of the day, we’re the ones who end up looking like fools ‘cause they’ve got all the power. We’re just puppets following their puppet master’s strings.

“I’m not saying all white people do this, but they all benefit from the ones who do. Some of them genuinely try to help make things better. But the reality is that the world’s system is wired in their favor. And that’s crazy ‘cause we created darn near everything in the world’s system. Civilization started with us. Art, mathematics, science, technology, architecture, all of it. But they stripped us of all that, brought us here to work for free.

“So now you’re stuck and ain’t got nothing to say, huh?

“I tried to tell you, this is the South. I told you to leave your city ways behind you. Even though we’ve had some improvements through the years, we’re still not where we should be. And we’re sure not where you think we are in that La La Land head of yours. Right now today, there are active Klansmen chapters in Tennessee. Right now today, there are hate groups, alt-right groups, militia groups, you name ‘em groups. I’m not saying all this to hear myself speak, or even to scare you. I need you to wake up, man. Man, you need you to wake up. The world don’t care that you exist as you are. You’ve gotta be different. Make your mark in an unusual and unpredictable way. Slinging drugs and getting caught up in a gang ain’t different. Bruhs do that every day. Drug dealers come a dime a dozen. You can find one on any given corner.

“I thought you were different.”

“I guess it’s just my day for tongue lashings,” Law mistakenly said allowed.

“No,” Mae said. “You had both of those coming.”

Monday morning couldn’t come fast enough. I’ve never been happier to go to school just to get out of the house. And I don’t even really like school like that. I’m not happy about riding the school bus with all these squares, but I think it’s the best compromise for the time being. This way, Echo and I aren’t bumping heads and he’s able to be there in the mornings so Cousin Mae is never without a male in the home with her.

I see Jillian and her brother in passing in the hall, but they don’t say anything to me and I don’t speak to them. I don’t know what parts they know other than the vandalism their father accused me of a few weeks back. Otherwise, they may not have a clue. They may not even know their father is connected to the KKK. But then I’m making assumptions about him like he is about me. But who else could it be? Who else would it be? He threatened me to my face after calling me out of my name. It just makes perfect sense to me.

I’ve made through most of my day with no drama. I’m on my way to homeroom when Principal Grier stops me in the hall.

“Mr. Davis, I need you to come with me.”

“What did I do now?”

“Just follow me please,” she said calmly. “Everyone that second bell means the hall should be clear now. Get to class.”

I follow her down the hall to the main office lobby, and then through her office door.

“Mr. Davis, please come in and have a seat.”

Mr. Sheldon, what are you doing in here?”

“Lawrence, I asked Mr. Sheldon to sit in on our meeting. I don’t think you’ll mind once I explain why.”

“Okay.”

“I’ve had a few calls and conversations about you over the past week. One of which was a three-way call from your guardian, Ms. Mae and your mother Mrs. Davis.”

“Um…okay.”

“I’m actually glad that they proactively reached out to me because other matters were also brought to my attention that honestly, without their input, would have skewed my views against you.

“Your mother, and I believe it’s your older cousin, correct?”

“Yes.”

“They told me about the recent racial disturbances at your home here in Nashville and that you reported being called out of your name by Jillian’s father, Mr. Bruce. Is that correct?”

“Yes, Principal Grier.”

“I’m glad they told me because you didn’t, leaving me only with Mr. Bruce’s information. Now, I can’t say who I believe or not, but given that both your guardians and Mr. Bruce filed police reports on their separate instances, I take this into great consideration as being true to some degree on either side.

“Mr. Davis, were you aware that not only was the Bruce home and vehicle vandalized a few weeks ago, but also shot at more recently than that?”

“You know…kids talk and all, so I heard rumors. I never buy into those, though. You never know who’s really telling the whole truth.”

“Mmm hmm. I see. Mr. Bruce seems to think that you are solely responsible for both occurrences.”

“Does he?”

“Yes, Lawrence, he does. What do you have to say about that?”

“Am I under arrest as a suspect? If not, I don’t have anything to say about that. It’s not my business.”

“I see what you mean, Mr. Sheldon. He is a very smart young man,” Principal Grier interjects. “Mr. Bruce is advocating for you to be expelled from the school. And if that doesn’t happen, he plans to pull his children and support out as well.”

“On what grounds?”

“On the grounds of our school’s zero tolerance policy.”

“But the last time I checked, I don’t go to school at Mr. Bruce’s house. What happens there is his personal business, not mine. So since he can’t prove I did something to his home, he wants to mess with me at school? That’s not fair.”

“Agreed. And it’s also agreed from my lengthy discussion with your mother and cousin that something is going on with you and you need some extra help. Which brings me to why Mr. Sheldon is here.

“Mr. Sheldon and I were talking and he’s willing to vouch for you as a good student to avoid expulsion, but based on a few conditions.”

“What are those, Mr. Sheldon?”

“That we have weekly one-on-one check-ins for the rest of the school year. One of your lunch periods belongs to me.”

“I…um, alright.”

“Additionally, you have to join one of my afterschool clubs. Take your pick. Will it be debate or Future Lawyers of America?”

“Man, you just want me to join that anyway. I don’t want to…”

“Mr. Davis, please remember that the alternative could be expulsion,” she said. “And from what your mom tells me, your options back home are few. Mr. Sheldon is trying to throw you a final lifeline here. So unless you want your story to end up like some of the sad ones we’re all too familiar with, I’d suggest you give one of his suggestions a try.”

“Okay…I’ll join debate.”

“Sounds like a plan to me, Mr. Sheldon. Do you agree?”

“Agreed,” Mr. Sheldon said, extending his right hand to Law.

“Okay. Agreed.”

“Principal Grier, thanks for allowing me to work with you on this. If we’re all done here, I’ll stop him by his homeroom for his daily attendance and then talk to him a few more minutes one-on-one.”

“That’s fine by me. Have a productive afternoon, Mr. Davis.”

“Thanks.”

As promised, we stop by my homeroom so I’m not marked truant for the day and then go to his classroom for our official first one-on-one.

“Mr. Sheldon, good looking out for me back there.”

“You know something; this is so much bigger than you.

“I can remember where I was the day the Rodney King verdict was announced. He was a black man, and a victim of police brutality. LAPD was right to pull him over for driving while intoxicated. They were not right to beat him gang style on the side of the road. It was all caught on video, and even with that level of proof, those officers of the law were all acquitted. Protest broke out all over the country.

“I was in Atlanta at the time, just a freshman at Clark Atlanta University. Like most college students at HBCUs in 1992, we took to the streets to march in protest. We marched all the way from the campus to the State Capitol. And you know who was waiting to meet us at the steps, cloaked in all white from head to toe and guarded by the State’s police?

“No sir.”

“It was the KKK. Standing there in broad day light, protected by the State police. The same police that black tax payers helped to finance. Cars were overturned and set on fire. Those same tax paid police marshalled us off the State Capitol grounds while they protected the Klan. Then to add insult to injury, sent in the National Guard and tear gassed our campus. There’s a gate around that campus right now because of that very day.

“I knew that very day that I and every other black man would need to maneuver differently in this world. Because no matter how hard I tried, how educated I became, or well-polished I presented, the odds were stacked in their favor. I knew right then that black men would have to work together and not against each other when our enemy wasn’t an enemy *of* the State, but protected by the state.

“At this point, it’s not about the white man being the main enemy against us, it’s about *us* being the main enemy against us. How can we say they’re the ones to blame when they’re no longer the ones in the driver’s seat of our lives? There’s all kinds of stuff wrong with the system and no it’s not fair that our kids our wired to fail by the time they reach third grade. None of that is fair, but what makes it worse is when we start hurting ourselves.

“It’s asinine to blame some Klansman for his noose around a black man’s neck, when that same black man stoops to his ignorant level or worse yet, holds a gun to another black man’s head.

“I’ve heard your full story over the past week, and two wrongs don’t make it right, Law. That’s what I’m trying to get you to see. You’re tearing us down as black people just as much now as a racist did back in the day – and even today. Only difference is, now we’ve got a double whammy of them against us and us against us. When does it stop, Law? And how does it stop if it doesn’t start with you?

“You go around campus, and everywhere else I’m sure, touting that your name is Law. You ‘are the Law.’ What since does that even make when you live by no laws at all. No principles. No moral compass. Nothing to personally guide your own way through life. You’re wasting not only my time, Law; you’re wasting your own.”

“Mr. Sheldon?”

“What Law?”

“This is the first time you didn’t call me Mister Law.”

“That’s because you’ve proven yourself to be otherwise. Respect is given where respect is earned.”

“What can I do to make it right, Mr. Sheldon?”

“You can wake your black ass up!”

I tried hard to hold it, but I couldn’t control the steady tear falling from my left eye. There were no words I could tell myself to suck it up or hold it up. I had screwed up. It never mattered to me before what someone thought of me. He got me with that one. How do I get pass all of this now?

“You’re now excused. I expect to see you in class and at the debate meeting every Thursday after school.”

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It’s been two months since everything went down with Mr. Bruce, and then Mr. Sheldon saving my butt. I’ve been preparing for my first debate, too. It’s next week. I worked really hard on it. The subject I chose is called ‘Reflections from a Racist.’ My thesis is that sometimes we can be taught how to hate so well by those who hate us, that we perpetuate that same hurt onto those we should love the most.

It’s almost my birthday, too. Mom’s going to try to come down to see me. She and Uncle John are talking about driving his Cady, all this way just for me. I’ve been talking to Dad more often, too. He’s not perfect. But maybe his role was always meant to be an example to me of what not to do. Maybe his purpose is just to make sure I find mine. I can’t be mad at that no more. If that’s all he has to give, then that’s all he has to give.

Echo and I aren’t perfect, but at least now I respect him more than I tease him. He was only trying to help me find my way. Just trying to mirror back to me a good image of myself. I invited him and Cousin Mae to my first debate.

“Our next debater is new to the team, but not new to sharing his opinions. Let’s welcome to the mic Mr. Law Davis,” said Mr. Sheldon.

“Good afternoon… can you hear me alright?”

“Yes, we can all hear you, Mr. Law. Please remember you’re being judged on timing as well as content,” Mr. Sheldon replied.

“Um okay…good afternoon.

“My focus for this afternoon is titled, Reflections from a Racist.’ My thesis is rooted in the premise that historically documented factors such as the Slave Patrols, Lynch Papers, Jim Crow Laws, Sundown Towns and others like these have innately taught black Americans, males in particular, to misappropriate our need to regain power by internalizing a shared racial hatred among ourselves. In other words, sometimes we can be taught how to hate so well by those who hate us, that we perpetuate that same hurt and hate onto those we should love the most.

“One may think that in 2023, racism would be a thing of the past. However, as recently as February 22, 2018, The Tennessean newspaper stated that, ‘though the total number of active Ku Klux Klan chapters fell nationwide as a new generation of white supremacists have rejected robes and hoods in favor of the more loosely organized so-called ‘alt-right’ movement of white nationalism, three new KKK groups have cropped up in Tennessee.’ And that’s according to the Southern Poverty Law Center, aka SPLC.

“Have you ever been so hurt, so mad that your tears won’t come out? Do you ever wonder where they go? I think they are collected in our chests, deep down in our hearts, like a cup of sorrow.

“I believe that at times all that pain gets rolled down from father to son, from brother to brother, on down the line. I believe that while some of us hood up for fashion and mystery, some of us just don’t want to be seen because we don’t know who we are. Our identity is questioned by everyone, all the time, even ourselves. Part of this comes from the reflections we mirror onto ourselves through racism. The racist things that make us internally feel inferior, while on the outside trying hard to look superior.

“Coming to this school, I often feel out of place. On one hand I like that some people fear me because of how I dress because it gives me back some of my power. On the other hand, it puts me in this bubble of being viewed as a monster on the prowl. So then the very thing that makes me feel safe, can make others feel unsafe around me.

“It’s a catch 22, just like hate, racism, and things meant to esteem one group over another as being less than.

“There have been days that I feel I don’t belong here. Admittedly, I’ve done things that were not as smart as I am, and that could hinder me along the way. And no, I may not deserve to be here, but I *am* here. And as a great man once said, I need to make my being here in this school, and in the world count. We all do.

“I close my argument by saying that the best way to slowly change the tide of the negative effects of racism is to be a ripple effect in the other direction. My focus has been all about me. What I wanted. What was best for me. Some recent things have happened to change that, at least a little. I’m still a work in progress.

“However, in turn, I ask my fellow classmates to join me in a ten-point platform to change the reflection of race we see in America, especially for black males in our society. I like to call them, the Creed of Law…

1. I will love myself.
2. I will show up as my best self at all times.
3. I vow to be different and unique, no matter who’s watching.
4. I promise to value life enough to not take it from my brother.
5. I will not take what I did not earn.
6. I will not sabotage my brother’s well-being.
7. I will value the views of others even if they don’t match my own.
8. I will hate, hate; especially the hate that makes me hate myself.
9. I will try to find good in everyone, and when I can’t I won’t let it corrupt me.
10. Today is a new day, I choose to start over what I messed up on yesterday.

“I now yield the mic to my opponent. Thank you.”

As I place the mic back in its holder, my eyes suddenly come into focus. I think I was too nervous to see anything other than my notes for the past 12 minutes. Oh wow, Echo and Cousin Mae came. After all I put them through. I lock eyes with Echo and he stands to his feet in applause. Others seated in the small auditorium applaud me as well. It feels good. Like, I might belong here.

I see Mr. Bruce as well. He’s saying to Mr. Sheldon something about me saying “admittedly” in my speech, and that somehow that means I admitted to what I did. Mr. Sheldon basically told him, “Mr. Law will learn to stop hiding behind his hood, when you stop hiding behind yours. How about we call it even and all start over again.”

Sounds fine by me. By the way, I’m wearing a shirt and tie.