

Shinning Soccer

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Chapter 1 : THE WRONG LIFE PATH

1986



Far Rockaway, Queens is best reached by driving over Jamaica Bay on the Cross Bay Bridge, or by taking the A Train that travels from upper Manhattan's west side to Far Rockaway. Once there, most traffic flows west on Beach Channel Drive, to the seaside mansions in peaceful Belle Harbor and Neponsit, once the playground for the rich in the early twentieth century.

Thousands of city dwellers on a sweltering summer day head for Breezy Point located at the far western tip of Far Rockaway that juts into the Atlantic Ocean. This is one of New York's coolest spots in the summer. The people are poor who head east on Beach Channel Drive, where 5,000 units of the peninsula's housing projects fall neatly in line. This is the project where my parents lived and this is where I grew up.

The housing projects are dangerous. It is an urban-renewal scheme that went terribly wrong. The neighborhood gangs wield enormous clout in the red brick housing projects, spreading fear and brutally enforcing territorial rules for their drug market. Visible from twenty miles away is the Manhattan skyline, which seems like another planet, totally cut off from the grim daily reminders

for the many who live in the Far Rockaway projects.

The stretch of community where we lived between 98th Street and the low 20s has too many kids raising kids and grandmothers raising grandchildren. There are many potentially valuable vacant oceanfront lots between the mansions and the projects because nobody wants to build anywhere near public housing and its violence. There are too many young unemployed black males with spare time during the day and there is too much dangerous activity along Beach Channel Drive at night.

Both born in 1961, my parents, Ted Wilson and Debra Taylor, lived with their families in the same government-subsidized housing, Edgemere Projects. My grandmother, Gail Wilson, conceived my father, Ted, with another man before she married Dan Wilson, a retired Green Beret soldier.

My father never knew his real father. His mother delivered his half-brother, Derek, in August 1966, when my father was five years old. His stepfather doted on his half-brother and did not give my father the affection or mentorship he gave Derek. It had to be painful for my father to experience.

My parents met in 1973 in junior high school when they were 12 and began seeing each other regularly. They were both athletic and played handball and paddleball together in their leisure time. In 1977 my 16-year-old mother became pregnant with my brother, Anthony, who was born the following year. My mother was young and very appealing during this time and unconditionally loved my father. My father moved in with my mother's eight-

member loving, close-knit family.

My mother's family at the time included her parents, Pearl and John Taylor, four sisters, and one brother the family called Mr. Koolness. The family's Edgemere Projects, apartment number 7D, had four bedrooms. My mother was the oldest child. My mother's parents embraced my father and treated him as if he was one of their own. My grandmother, Pearl, worked full time at a hospital and my grandfather, John, a retired veteran of the U.S. Army who served for many years, also worked full time. They shared their home with their six children, my father and his children.

I was born a year after my brother. My sister, Teresa, was born seven years later in 1986. My father was able to finish high school in 1979. Excelling at many athletic sports, he went on to Kingsboro Community College in Brooklyn where he was an outstanding track athlete. But he needed money for his family, so college did not last long. My parents married in 1979 when they became of age.

My father greatly admired and appreciated my mother's parents and what they were doing for him and his children. Yet, he felt a deep responsibility to be a man and financially support his family. He also wanted my mother to get a full-time job so they could be independent of her family and eventually move out of the projects. My father believed that if they both worked and saved money, and if my mother's sisters could take care of my brother and me, we could get free of the projects.

My mother was employed for short periods of time but

kept getting laid off. Hating having to work away from her family, she stopped searching for jobs. Her frame of mind was, "I don't want to work. I should be at home with my kids." Without my mother bringing in money to help my father, she applied for Welfare. When applying, she declared she was a single mother and so her two children were permanently given her maiden surname, Taylor. This was emotionally painful for my father to accept, but he did so quietly.

The dream of moving out of my mother's family's apartment seemed to be gone. The burden of making enough money to get an apartment fell entirely on my father's shoulders. Legitimate work for young black men from the projects is not easily obtained and wages are low.

My father was driven to find a job. He landed one with PATH as a trackman working at the loading dock from midnight to 8:00 a.m. Despite getting laid off from time to time, he worked there for three years until he was permanently laid off. He then worked for U.P.S. and eventually got laid off there too. PATH was not hiring, so working there again wasn't an option. He began working at a gas station for a short time and found pumping gas was something he clearly didn't want to do. Months and came went and he was still without work.

Out of ideas and sinking into desperation, my father turned to his stepfather, Dan, for a loan to buy food for his family, but was soundly told, "No!" His stepfather told him that he and mother were irresponsible.

Under great pressure to find work, my father needed to clear his head and figure out a way to earn money. He

needed emotional support and ideas to help him figure out what to do. He turned to his mother Gail's parents, who lived in a house in South Jamaica, Queens, on Linden Boulevard. Ed and Clara Jones were very humble people. Ed was from Forsythe, Georgia, and was a World War II veteran.

While stationed in Texas during the war, he met Clara who grew up in nearby Taylor, Texas. The couple married in her hometown during the war. After the war they moved to Harlem and then in the 1950s they bought their home in South Jamaica, Queens. Clara worked in a curtain factory. When they first moved to New York, Ed drove a taxi for some time. Then he obtained training and skills and became a motorman for the M.T.A., operating the Number 7 Train in Flushing.

My father's grandparents' wisdom and nurturing helped my father to feel whole again and have a clearer perspective. By the time my father left his grandparent's house, he knew what he would do to obtain a full time, secure job and find a way to get his family out of the projects. Only a few hours after visiting his grandparents my father went to Jamaica Avenue and enlisted with the U.S. Air Force.

It was 1982. He came home and explained to my mother and family that he had enlisted in the Air Force and explained the details of going to military boot camp. He assured them money would be forthcoming regularly. My mother and her family were elated. At the time I was about three years old.

My father was sent to Lackland Air Force Base in San

Antonio, Texas for boot camp. After completing eight weeks of training he came home on leave and stayed with the family for two weeks. From there he went to Patrick Air Force Base in Brevard County, Florida, where he was assigned to the Air Force's 549th Tactical Air Support Training Group.

Patrick Air Force Base is located on the east coast between Cocoa Beach and Satellite Beach and southeast of the city of Orlando. The base is home of the Cape Canaveral Air Force Station and the Eastern Range. There were three different areas that served as housing, which included quarters for families, an inn for visitors, and dormitories for permanent enlisted personnel. It also included many clubs, a library, and access to the nearby beach. My father resided in the dormitory.

Several years passed till my father worked his way up to the rank of sergeant with the Military Police. He came home for visits as often as he could afford and sent his family money regularly as he promised. In 1986 when Anthony was eight and I was seven, my father was able to secure a house on the base for his family. His commander pulled a lot of strings to get the house.

My father was ecstatic that he had finally reached his goal of earning enough money to support his family and to get them out of the projects and into a house in Florida. It had not been easy for him to be away from my mother and his children for four years. At last he could completely fulfill his promise.

With excitement and elation my father called my mother with the wonderful news. My mother was far from

elated. She emphatically said, “No,” to moving. My father called day after day for two months, begging my mother to come to Florida and bring his children where his family would have a home by the ocean. After two months, the house was lost to another family. My father was mortified because his commander had done so much to get him the house and he felt he could never have the same relationship again with him. Worse, he was devastated that my mother had refused to move.

Why would my mother deny her children and herself a better life in a safe place away from the projects? In my father’s absence, my mother had made a life for herself without him. It was easy and familiar for her to be with her family who surrounded her, offering help with her children. She had her welfare check, plus the money my father sent her. Her decision sent our family down a permanent path filled with tragedy and sadness. Our family had lost our only chance for a better life.

Distraught and deeply depressed, my father went to a girlfriend’s house on the base. He went alone and entered the backyard with his military issued revolver. Without hesitation he shot himself in the forehead. It is beyond strange that he was able to walk into the backdoor of the house with a bullet in his head. His friend, occupied with paperwork at the kitchen table, asked without looking up,

“Are you all right? Did you hear the loud noise?” Without answering, he walked directly into her bedroom and laid down on the bed. Immersed in paperwork, the girlfriend didn’t follow him into the bedroom. Later, he got up from the bed and collapsed on the kitchen floor. Seeing

what just took place, and now terrified at the sight, the friend called for an ambulance. He was rushed to a nearby hospital and considered to be in critical condition.

Notified by the hospital about my father's condition, his commander called my father's stepfather to relate the details of what happened. His stepfather and my father's half-brother, Derek, got on the next flight to Florida. His stepfather stayed by my father's bedside for several days and remained for over three weeks to make sure my father was going to live. My father was surprised his stepfather and half-brother cared enough about him to rush to his bedside. Miraculously my father lived but sustained massive brain and physiological damage that required years of rehabilitation.

Today my father lives in Raleigh, North Carolina, with his common-law wife. And I now have a deep abiding bond with him.

My parents could have made a far better life than what Far Rockaway offered. It is a sad fact that young people, including my mother, get caught up in the life of the projects and lose the possibility of getting out.

Rockaway Peninsula, New York

Two Rockaways

Edgemere Projects, Far Rockaway, New York

The far left of the Rockaway Peninsula is where the wealthy go to live and enjoy life. To the far right is situated the housing projects.

The beachfront separating the two Rockaways is
vacant, dreary, desolate.

Even with its ample land and potentially beautiful
spaces, the strip is not built up due to project gangs, crime
and violence.

Chapter 2 : BROTHERS FROM ANOTHER

1986



*A bit like Far Rockaway, the Patrick Air Force Base
in Florida is located*

*on a peninsula between Cocoa Beach and Satellite
Beach, Florida.*

Little seven-year-old boy, growing up in the hood, I thought I had a perfect childhood and I didn't want for anything. There were no sprinklers in the hood, only brick buildings, concrete, and poorly kept grass lawns. Even so, growing up there I thought the community we were raised in was a bit of heaven.

Word was that Edgemere was the toughest project in Far Rockaway, but I wasn't thinking about who was tough and who was not. 'Stop-1' was the name of our neighborhood bodega. My mother gave my brother Anthony and me food stamps to buy each of us a sandwich. She gave Anthony the stamps because he was the more responsible and the oldest.

"Hey, Anthony, Mommy said to get us heroes and a fifty-cent juice," I said.

"Duh, I know what Mommy said. Okay?" he retorted.

Looking through the bodega window, I stared at a delicious pickle staring back at me, calling my name.

“Anthony!” I yelled to my brother.

“What?” he answered in frustration for yelling at him since he was standing beside me.

“Mommy said I can get a pickle, too,” I said lying through my teeth.

“She didn’t say that!” Anthony answered, as he had listened to my mother’s instructions.

Clutching the food stamp book, Anthony told the deli man, “Let me have two hero sandwiches.”

“What would you like on the sandwiches?” the deli man asked.

“Turkey and cheese with everything on it,” Anthony responded, and added, “with a little salt and pepper.”

“I don’t want the same kind as you,” I said.

“Well, you’re getting it anyway,” said Anthony.

“You gonna get high cholesterol,” I said.

He hit me and said, “Shut up! Go get two fifty-cent grape juice and put them on the counter.”

I like fruit punch so I did the opposite of what my brother told me to do, promptly placed two different Sunnydale juices on the counter. Just then a group of girls, who went to our school, came in the bodega and I started to panic.

“Anthony! Anthony! Some girls just walked in and I

think one of them is in your class.” I was nervous the girls would see the food stamps.

Now aware of the girls, Anthony said, “Come on,” pulled me to the register, hurriedly paid for the food and we took off. Getting caught with food stamps was embarrassing.

During our early years my brother and I developed close friendships. TomTom and Dino lived on the first floor in the building across from ours, in apartment 1M to be exact. Dino and I were like the “little brothers,” while Anthony and TomTom were the “big brothers.” My brother and I referred to them as brothers from another mother, or just “brothers from another.” Every new pair of sneakers we got, we would always run a race.

“I bet I’m faster than you,” I taunted Dino. I was rocking the low top Lotto Track sneakers,

gray and white. There were two Velcro patches, one on each shoe, replacing shoelaces! AND you could take off the old Velcro and replace them with new ones! They were fresh!

“No, you can’t. I can beat anybody,” Dino bragged. Dino had on New Balance and he was the smallest of the group. I wasn’t trying to let him beat me, though.

“Oh, yeah, let’s race around the circle,” I challenged.

“Okay! On your mark,” TomTom called out. Dino was crouched with his head down in a professional running stance. “Get set,” TomTom continued.

I knew I was fast, but not as fast a Dino. I was fat-boy

fast, ate everything up, acting like I wanted to run it all off. My mother told me I was a human garbage disposal.

“Two and a half. . . one and three-quarters,” TomTom continued dragging out the countdown.

“Say ‘go’ already!” I yelled.

TomTom was stalling, hoping his little brother would win the race. He finally yelled, “Okay, okay. . .Go!”

Before I lowered my head, Dino was gone! He dusted me off like a bad habit. Me . . . behind, and no way to catch up. When I reached the finish line, TomTom and Dino had a “look” on their faces, mutely saying,

“We told you so!”

So, I had to come up with an excuse. I started breathing hard and heavy. All of a sudden, “Oh, oh. I can’t breathe,” I whimpered, while my brother knew good and damn well that I was faking it.

“Stop lyin”, My brother said as he sneered. You swear that you be havin’ attacks all the time.”

I continued breathing hard. ”Yes, I do. You know I have asthma,” I whined, giving him a nudge on his side. When I gave him that nudge, he jabbed me hard on my side with his elbow and the impact was severe. “Ooooww, DAMN!” I cried out. And just like that we were fighting. What? What? What up? What up?” I said out of breath. We were circling around each other like a real boxing match.

Our fight was soon over and done with. We never hit each other in the face. Never! We had too much love for one another. Instead, we went for the body, or one of us did

what we thought was a chokehold on the other. This time I was the one who did the chokehold on my brother.

“Anthony and Todd, get yo’ asses upstairs right now! Now!” Mom screamed. My mother saw me choking my brother. I didn’t even know how to give a real chokehold. It wasn’t like I was trained in jiu jitsu, or what not. We began walking slowly.

“Hurry the up! Ya’ll want to be embarrassed in front of yo’ friends?” my mom asked, screaming and cursing like a sailor. It didn’t matter if we rushed upstairs or took our time. We were going to get our asses whipped, so we might as well take our time.

“We’ll catch up later,” I said to the brothers.

“You gonna get a whippin’,” TomTom taunted.

“Debra gonna tear yo’ ass up! I feel sorry for ya’ll. Sike!” Dino jeered.

We thought we were playing by ourselves, but saw the neighbors were laughing at us. We were humiliated.

“Ya’ll better get yo’ asses upstairs Now!” my mom again yelled out the apartment window. We got “an ass whippin’” by her that night.

I don’t know where he came from, or how our friendship or brotherhood started. He lived on the same floor as us. We lived in 7G, his mom’s apartment was 7D right around the corner from us. We all had our favorite toy—GI Joe, He-Man, Thunder Thunder Thunder Cats. Hooooee!

We each had our favorite character. Jack, my brother

from another mother, loved Voltron. Voltron is an action figure that consists of five body parts—arm, arm, leg, leg, torso connected to its head. It’s red, blue, yellow, green, and the main body and head parts are black.

One day my brother and I were playing in the hallway outside our apartment and Jack’s stepdad, Don, got off the elevator. “Hey, hey, ya’ll’ seen Jake? I’m gonna beat his ass!” He said with anger.

“No, ah, didn’t see him,” my brother answered.

“All right, ya’ll make sure you tell him he has an ass whippin’ comin’ he ain’t never gonna forget,” Don said in a rage. He walked around the corner, opened and slammed his apartment door.

“Ohhh shit, Jack’s gonna reeeaaally get it!” I said.

“It’s about to go down!” my brother added.

Biding our time for Jack to show up, we knocked on people’s apartment doors and ran. We had the entire building in an uproar. We didn’t do it to the people that lived on our floor for fear of mother’s wrath. It was the fifth floor tonight. Once we picked a door, we knocked a hard on it, BAM, BAM, BAM, BAM!

“Oh shit, let’s go,” I said. We ran as soon as the door began to open.

Someone shouted out what they were going to do when they caught us. “Whoever did this shit, you know what’s coming to ya’ll!” That made our day! Creating havoc in our building was fun. We ran to the sixth floor out of breath. Normally Jack would be with us causing chaos, but he

missed out on a great door-knocking time.

“Whew, I’m tired. All this runnin’! I’m gonna catch an asthma attack,” I gasped trying to catch my breath.

“Oh, shut up. You don’t even have asthma that bad,” my brother said with annoyance.

“You shut up! Yes, I do! Mom said she gonna get me an asthma pump,” I replied.

Sibling rivalry wasn’t the case with my brother and me. We didn’t battle or compete with one another.

We soon started tussling. Jack got off the elevator.

“Guess what I got?” Jack asked.

“What, Jack, what?” we both asked at the same time.

“DEEZ NUTS! Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha,” Jack said cracking up.

“You corny, man. Stop playin’,” my brother said annoyed. We were happy to see our brother from another. Too bad we had to tell him the news.

“Oh, man, I almost forgot. Your stepdad was lookin’ for you,” I declared.

“He has something for you,” my brother added.

“What he got for me?” Jack asked excitedly.

I tried to think quickly, as I moved closer to Jack, and as if I didn’t want anyone else to hear, even though the only people listening were the three of us. I said, “He got Voltron for you!” Jack’s eyes lit up like two bright light bulbs were just switched on.

“Yup, I seen the box,” added my brother with faked sincerity. Forever a joker, we wanted to get back at Jack for the many jokes he played on us. Jack was so enthusiastic that he was going to receive his favorite toy! He rushed into his apartment with pure excitement on his face. We didn’t listen at the apartment door, but waited near it. Not one minute went by when the whippin’ started.

“What? You tryin’ me, boy.” Jack’s stepfather warned.

We heard Jack scream as the belt bounced back and forth—WHAAP, WHAP. We laughed out loud til mother called us into the apartment.

“Get in here! What ya’ll gigglin’ ‘bout? Jack ain’t the only one gettin’ his ass whipped tonight!” she threatened. Given her mood, it was obvious she and all the neighbors had heard Jack scream.

“No, Ma, we can’t get a beatin’, too,” my brother pretended to whine. He was good at that. That was how our night ended. We did chores went to sleep.

The next day TomTom, my brother, Dino and I were playing at the front of the building.

“I can do a flip,” Dino bragged.

I called his bluff. “No, you can’t. Prove it!” I dared him.

Dino took off his jacket and proceeded to do what seemed impossible.

“Off the bench, right,” Dino said confirming the spot where he would start the flip.

Dino bounced on his toes like he was on a pool diving

board. He was up and over, just like that, and landed on his feet! Not a scratch!

“Ya’ll believe me now? Ya’ll believe me now?” Dino kept on bragging.

“Told ya’ so, yeah,” TomTom chided. He had all the faith in the world in his brother.

Dino then stood tall and just began flipping out of nowhere.

“Oh, wow!” my brother said with utter amazement.

“One, two, three, four, five,” counted TomTom.

“You did five flips in a row and I can’t do one,” my brother admitted.

“Man, I can do that. That’s easy,” I bragged. Taking off my jacket, I handed it to my brother.

“Hold this and watch an acrobat do his thing!” I imitated each move Dino did—the breathing, “Whooo, whooo, whooo,” then the stretching, “ahhhh, ahhhh,” and the toe bouncing. I was ready. “Okay, ready, set....”

I went down, and up and over, eyes closed hoping I was going to land on my feet like Dino did.

“Ohhhhhh, ohhhhhh!” I screamed. I had “bust” my ass and knocked the wind out of lung! They were laughing, including my brother. I got up, embarrassed and heated.

“What ya’ll laughin’ at?” I walked up to Dino and knocked him on the ground.

“Hey, don’t shove my brother!” TomTom warned.

“Oh, yeah, wha’cha gonna do?” I threw my hands up, it was on. TomTom threw his hands up like a professional fighter.

“I’m gonna ... you up,” TomTom said. He threw a couple of jabs, one landing on my chest. I hit him with a two-piece. A crowd of kids has gathered, yelling, “Fight, fight, fight!”

Suddenly, out of nowhere TomTom and Dino’s big sister came running out of the building screaming, “...him up, TomTom, get him, get him!”

I had never been in a fight before so I tried to made the best of it. “Pow!” TomTom caught one in the face. I had to think fast. I was tired holding up my hands. I charged him and knocked him down. Now we were wrestling.

“Get off me! Get off me!” shouted TomTom.

“No, you gotta fight!” I screamed back. Is this what wrestling is all about? I was exhausted.

“Ahhh, shit! Get off me, get off me! TomTom screamed and bit me!

“That’s right, bite him and don’t let go,” screamed his sister.

When he finally let go, I had teeth marks on my left shoulder! His teeth penetrated my skin to the meat!

“Anthony and Todd, get ya’ll asses in the house right damn now!” yelled my mom from our apartment window. We ran up six flights of stairs like someone was trying to kill us.

“What in the hell ya’ll fightin’ for?” asked my mom.

We tried to come up with an excuse for the scuffling. Out of nowhere my uncle Koolness came in the room and smacked my brother in the back of his head.

“And what was you doin’ when Todd was fightin’? Just standin’ there lookin’ stuck on stupid? “The next time ya’ll get into trouble, always, and I mean ALWAYS be there for each other. You two understand?” We shook our heads. “Don’t just shake your heads. I want to hear ‘yes.’” Uncle Koolness demanded.

“Yes, Uncle Koolness,” we said in unison.

“Ya’ll two are brothers. That means if you get into some trouble, you’re gonna be there for him, and vice versa. Always jump in. But don’t be instigatin’ or promote any nonsense. Do you hear me?”

“Yes, Uncle Koolness.”

Uncle Koolness went back to the terrace to work out with his friends. We kept our brotherhood with TomTom and Dino, even after TomTom had left me with a permanent scar!

Chapter 10 : C-74: GLADIATOR SCHOOL

1996



In prison all adolescents had to attend school. Prison school hours were Monday to Friday, 8:00 AM to 2:30 PM. Class was mandatory. Not required to wear uniforms, we inmate school-age adolescents tried to stay fresh, unfortunately at somebody else's expense.

We had expensive taste—Parasuco jeans (a low-rise tapered, slim leg jeans for a mere \$120.00), fresh new Nike Air shoes, the white-on-whites, Pelle Pelle leather jackets (another expensive item in leather or suede for \$250 and up) and a variety of button up shirts. We dressed New York style in prison, as if we were going out on the town to meet some fine ladies. We were caught up in the hype of fashion and other meaningless things.

I understood my family's struggles and didn't expect them to help me financially. I got the idea to open a store or commissary of my own selling items my family sent me every now and then. If I sold one item, the buyer would have to give me two items of their own. This was called "juggling."

I was making a killing, wheeling and dealing. My

prison business was the beginning of my entrepreneur skills education. During the school semester I fully intended to focus on attaining my G.E.D., but in jail there were always insurmountable obstacles.

“Mr. T., what’s good wit’cha?” a classmate asked the teacher. Mr T. ignored the kid and continued writing an equation on the blackboard.

“Yo! Mr. T., when’s the last time...?” a teen named Big-Aloe ventured, but he was abruptly cut off

“When was the last time you had your colon cleansed?” Mr. T. quickly retorted back to Big-Aloe.

“nts. Come on, Mr. T., I wanna live vicariously through you, just for a day. Come on, tell us a story,” Big-Alo joked.

“A double!” a young student added.

“That’s right, a double!” Mr. T. confirmed while the class was on the edge of their seats.

“Speed it up, Mr. T, we only have all day,” said Big-Alo sarcastically.

“Studying the menu, she had the nerve to order an appetizer and a meal! I’m like, damn this whore is gree-day!” the entire class erupted with laughter.

“No, she didn’t! You about to go bankrupt, Mr. T.!” said one of the students seated in the far right of the classroom.

As a character in a movie, Mr. T took our imaginations into twist-and-turn directions.

“Now our food is on the table, right, and she ate the appetizer and was digging into the meal. I ask her for some of her wings. She said, ‘NO!’ I was getting really angry and I asked her in a sarcastic manner, ‘Aren’t I paying for this feast?’” Mr. T. had the students’ full attention and added, “and she said, ‘If you want to, be my guest.’”

“This nigga’s fabricating,” Big-Aloe called out with sarcasm.

“Hold on! Hold on!” responded Mr. T.

I took the pass to go to bathroom while Mr. T. was ending up his storytelling. I didn’t have to use the bathroom but just wanted to roam the halls, you know, being a teenager. I checked in with a female officer and gave her my pass. Right before I entered the bathroom, I heard inmates side-betting on a roll.

“What you got on the roll?” one of the spectators asked.

“I bet five and better,” Twin said while the spectators look on. “Damn!” Twin looked down at the sorry four he just rolled.

“Anybody can beat that,” said Tah-Tah, a contender, who started shaking the dice hard in his hand and called out, “Six bitches, HUH! Pay me! Pay me!” Tah-Tah shouted, looking pleased because of the triples rolled

magnificently off of his fingertips.

The Twin was mad he lost and shouted out, “You cheated!” Tah-Tah’s mood changed from pure excitement into raging anger. Glaring at the Twin, he said, “You gonna ass bet me?” Tah-Tah suddenly revealed a banger, a Del

Monte sharp-edged can lid that easily cut through flesh.

“ON THE GO BACK,” an officer yelled out letting us know school was over.

Just in time for the go back, Twin and I rushed back to the classroom and took our places standing on line as if we never left the classroom.

“MOD 4, proceed,” the guard called out.

As we were walking in line, Tah-Tah and one of his dorm members were behind Twin and me. When we approached the staircase, Twin and I hid behind the staircase until Tah-Tah and his dorm member appeared. I hemmed duke up. Twin started tussling with Tah-Tah, who pulled out his banger and slashed the Twin from ear to mouth. It was like an instant reflex. I was shocked at what Tah-Tah had done. Tah-Tah threw his banger down the staircase and hurried back to his house. I hurriedly got into the front of the moving line. As soon I got to my bunk, E.R.U. came storming into the dorm and one of them shouted the order,

“Hands on your head! Face the wall! NOW! NOW!”

An hour later, everyone had been searched, the dorm was ransacked, and shanks, knives, scrub brushes made into weapons were found and confiscated. After the E.R.U. left, I was told to pack up along with three others in the unit. We weren't given any reason. I was punished with six months in the BING.

The BING became over populated. I was there for only 90 days, not the 6 months that I was supposed to do.

My incarceration classification went way up and I was no longer permitted to be in the MOD 2 housing. I was sent back to 2 Main, the place I was first sent to with individual cells. Being placed in 2 Main, I wasn't allowed to go to school. Several weeks later I got unexpected news. At 3:00 in afternoon, my cell door opened unexpectedly. I stuck my head out and the officer summoned me to approach the Bubble.

“Your family wants you to call home immediately and you can use the phone now,” said the officer, as he pointed toward the phone. I quickly dialed the phone and Aunt April answered, “Hello.”

Trying not to sound anxious, I asked, “Hey, Auntie, what’s going on?”

“I have some terrible news, Todd,” my sobbing aunt replied.

“What’s going on? I asked.

“Mama, died. She passed away yesterday,” my weeping aunt replied and continued, “Todd, the funeral will be held on Monday. The jail lets inmates attend the bereavement services of loved ones, right?”

I could feel the tears developing and could barely control myself from crying. “Yes, Auntie, immediate family members are allowed to attend.”

Aunt April said, “Okay I will contact the prison authorities and hopefully you can attend the funeral.”

I responded, “All right,” I could hear stress in her voice.

“This is too much for me to bear, but I have so much to do before Monday. I will see you at the services, Todd. Love you,” Aunt April sobbed as she said her goodbye to me.

The news of my grandmother’s death devastated me and left me speechless. I was grateful she hung up before me, because I couldn’t talk or hold back the tears any longer.

“C.O., open my cell,” I said and began walking at a moderate pace wiping my eyes and trying not to show any emotion. Once I got into my cell the officer locked me in and I began crying into the night.

Early Monday morning I began to get prepared. All I had were jeans to wear to the funeral. A fellow inmate lent me a pair of tan slacks to wear so that I looked more appropriate for the service. I wore a nice Ralph Lauren button-up shirt to go with the slacks, and Clark’s Wallabies shoes. It was important for me to look appropriate from my grandma’s services. Breakfast ended at 6:30 am and I didn’t bother to go for the reason that I thought the officer might let me know it was time for me to go. It was 8:00 am and I was still in my cell. Then 9:00 am, 10:30 am passed and I was still in my cell.

“Come on now, officer, what is taking so long?” I yelled. Pacing back forth at 12:15 pm and still the officer didn’t call out my name.

“On the Chow!” the officer hollered. It turned out that I built my hopes up for a big letdown. I didn’t go to my grandma’s funeral and it almost crushed me. Two days

later I was transported to a prison upstate.

Chapter 11 : SURPRISE, SURPRISE!

Early June 1997



Adolescence starts at age 10 when puberty begins and ends at 19 with the start of adulthood. By the young age of 16 I was sentenced to serve one to three years in prison. I served 12 months on Rikers Island and then was sent three hours away to Ulster Correctional Facility, located in Naponoch, Ulster County, New York. It is a medium security prison for male adults and a reception center for new intakes.

Once there, I appeared before the State County Parole Board and got my release date. After two short months, my stay there ended and I was sent to Queensboro Correctional Facility in Long Island City, Queens, New York. It is a minimum-security prison with the primary purpose of acting as a re-entry center for male inmates being released from prison.

After three weeks, BOOM! I was free!

When I became an adult, I thought about the time I spent in Rikers when I was teenage. The adolescent inmates were all without guidance, and we lived like gladiators every day. The dorms were dangerous. It was the survival of the fittest. This was our normal.

To lock up kids in prison without guidance is a crime in itself. The majority of the kids go on to be gangsters or long-term prisoners and they don't have much of a chance of ever living a normal life.

With all my resolutions about changing my life and living better, it wasn't going to happen. It didn't take long to get back in the life of the hood.

Chapter 12 : MAYHEM

Early June 1997



“**H**ey, young blood, welcome home from prison!” a neighbor, who obviously saw many neighbors return from prison, called out.

I returned to Far Rockaway projects wearing my New York State prison uniform: black State issued boots, called in prison lingo Busta Browns, with checkered shoelaces, straight-legged blue dungarees, white t-shirt and a tan jacket. Strolling through the town appearing like a Corcraft advertisement, my apparel was undoubtedly prison fashion and obviously so to my neighbors.

I wanted to see my brother and talk with him about our lives and the future. We had missed experiencing so many things. Being poverty stricken and having years and years of wrong decision-making, I had learned in prison that it was time for a change of the way we lived. We needed to change our behavior, too.

I walked into our family’s project building. My same-old chariot arrived and as many times before I stepped over the piss in the elevator. I shook my head in disgust making a note of one important thing: I wanted to change my life.

I wanted a totally new environment far away from the projects, instead of living near a lowlife who kept pissing in the damn elevator. The elevator door opened on the seventh floor.

“TODD, IS THAT YOU? Oh, my god, my baby’s home!” my mother screamed. She was so loud it was practically a worldwide broadcast. “MY SON! MY SON!” my mother screamed. Using a Heimlich maneuver, she had her arms wrapped tightly around my husky frame.

“So much for the surprise,” I whispered to myself, feeling disappointed. On the bright side, I was more than happy to see my mom. And no matter what, I wanted to get the “street” out of her. The streets were wearing her thin, but there was still hope.

“Let’s go inside,” I said, while passing the color-painted brick walls. Every project building in New York City had the same painted brick walls in various colors. My mom escorted me as if I was a stranger to my home. I opened the front door of my grandparent’s apartment that my siblings and I once shared along with my aunts, uncles, and cousins.

We were once a large family but we weren’t anymore. What was left of my family was spread out into many different places. The apartment seemed so empty. Everything in the apartment seemed to be in miniature, as opposed to life in a large prison compound where everything was oversized. Someone important was missing in the four-bedroom apartment. I slowly opened my grandparent’s bedroom door and felt the chilling cold. It was the very beginning of June and the sun was shining

but the room felt cold. Everything was in place in the room like they had never left.

Over the years I felt a sense of self-worth as I enter my grandparents' home. The monarch had left me with a sense of emptiness. The backbone and the spirit of the family were no longer there.

I sat on the bed and quietly reminisced. If not the kitchen, everyone would pile into my grandparent's bedroom whenever there was a family crisis. Their furniture was a matching set, while on the left of the room Granddaddy's dresser and mirror and the other side was Grandma's. The feeling of warmth was nowhere to be found. I was profoundly sad I couldn't go to my grandmother's funeral. The thought of this deeply saddened me, even today.

I got up from the bed and adjusted my clothing. Memories of my childhood were still fresh recalling the many scoldings we got from Grandma for throwing Ninja Stars in the trees for target practice. Grandma would say, "Keep on playing with those thing-a-ma-jigs and you gonna lose an eye." It was warnings like that she would say to us.

I smiled recalling the childhood that we had. I remembered those times vividly. Mom would say, "Here, baby, I poured you a glass of soda." Although the acidity didn't agree with my skin, in 2.5 seconds I downed it anyway. "You know, you were thirsty!" she would say with surprise and then we would both laugh.

"Todd, now that you're back home, make sure you take

the time out to visit your great grandma, she will really like that,” my mother requested. The next day I was totally reluctant about going out, applying for jobs, and going to job interviews while looking shabby in my prison outfit. I needed financial independence, and, Lord knows, I wanted to do right.

My great grandfather, who lived in in the middle-class neighborhood of Jamaica in Queens, had us mowing the lawn and trimming the hedges. He didn’t give us a dime. At a tender age doing this chore taught us discipline and hard-working skills. Once we got the hang of it we thought we were masters of horticulture. It was my great grandfather who taught us the principle of hard work. This and many other principles of my great grandfather are well embedded in me.

Rushing, I went to pay my great-grandmother a visit in South Jamaica. Walking down Linden Boulevard I was thinking of ways to find employment. I had to figure out a way because I was about to face Clara Jones and I knew she wanted me to have an A-plan, a B-plan, and a C-plan of what I was going to do with my life.

I rang Great Grandma’s doorbell and she opened the door right away.

“Oh, my goodness!” she cried out, “Look who has come to pay me a visit!”

I realized how much I missed her smile as I leaned in to embrace her with a tight hug.

“Mmm-mm-mm, give me some sugar. You got so big! Look at you! Now I have my own personal ‘He-Man,’” she

said with a big smile referring to the main character in an animated television show we watched as kids,

“You make yourself right at home,” Great Grandmother said. “I just came from the grocery store. I had to get some snacks, child. You know your grandma has to have her snacks,” she shouted from the kitchen. “Todd, you hungry?”

“Yes!” I shouted.

“Well, go ahead and wash your hands while I make you a sandwich,” I was already heading upstairs before half the syllables left her tongue. I washed my hands and went to do a checkup on old my bedroom. I entered my bedroom that I once shared with my brother and it looked like nothing had been touched since I went to prison.

I sat down on one of the two twin-sized beds placed side by side and had matching linens. Reminiscing on how every single night as we went to bed my great grandma would say as she tucked us in bed, “Sleep tight and don’t let the bed bugs bite.” As a child, I didn’t know there were real bed bugs!

“Todd, come get your lunch,” grandma called to me. I quickly headed downstairs. On the kitchen table sat two sandwiches with a dill pickle on the side. The table was set with knife and fork and a French folded napkin. Sweet, just like the old times, I thought. It was a civilized ritual totally opposite of prison meals making me appreciate how my grandmother cared for me. As I bit into the delicatessen cold cut sandwich, I choked on the bread as the expected interrogation began.

“You looking for a job?” she asked.

“Yes, Grandma. I started looking for a job yesterday,” I lied to her.

“Boy, you just came home yesterday. It might not been 24 hours since you was released. You tryin’ to outwit me, boy? Huh?”

Note to self: I’m gonna take the second sandwich as I walk out the door.

“Well, your grandma retired many moons ago. I don’t know what the job market looks like, but if things become too difficult for you, you go right ahead to one of those temp agencies,” she suggested. “Don’t you even think about goin’ on Welfare. You know I’m not knocking anyone, but if you go down to the Welfare Office, I’ve got a bullet with your name on it!”

It was hard to tell if she was kidding the way she said this, but my grandmother’s sternness clearly conveyed that she wasn’t to be taken for granted and that I’d better listen to her.

“You stay put. I’ll be right back,” she ordered. I pretended to stay as rigid as possible. My grandmother went upstairs, while I fantasized flying out the door with the sandwich. If I knew that she was going to scold me about getting a job, I wouldn’t have come. But I was kidding myself, because I knew my grandmother loved me and was just looking out for my wellbeing. Dreading yet another scolding, I wrapped the second sandwich and was near the front door.

“You know, your daddy was hard headed. Didn’t I tell you to stay put! You hard of hearing? Huh, boy?” she scolded me once again. “You take this here and STAY OUT OF TROUBLE, ya’ hear.”

As she handed me an envelope and kissed my cheek, Grandma said, “Call and let me know how you’re doing. Okay?”

Walking on the street with my head held high, I felt gratitude for having amazing grandparents. I opened the envelope, saw money and with a short message, “A token of generosity.” I was very thankful for the reminder that I was her grandson and I would use the gift of money wisely. Needing what I considered essential things, I went shopping, fast! Instead of buying professional clothing, I bought a bunch of jeans and sneakers. That’s what is called Broke Rich. I meant well, but because of my inexperience and youth, I didn’t do well.

At home for two weeks and diligently searching, I didn’t find employment. I did all the necessary steps, or what I thought were the right steps. It became clear that I was eighteen and didn’t have a high school diploma. So getting a job wasn’t my main objective anymore, getting my diploma was. I also realized I didn’t have the right clothes.

Six weeks passed, I still didn’t have a job and didn’t have money. I was studying for my high school diploma at home, BUT I was spending more time getting acquainted with the ladies.

Although being raised in the inner city could be fun, we

were faced with difficult situations that were violent, often for no reason. The summer of 1997 was lit! The savagery that was taking place in the neighborhood was insane. Several times a week friends or family members were beaten viciously for no reason. Running into an old neighborhood friend, I asked,

“So, what’s your plans for the weekend, Samantha? I know they doin’ it big at Penn State,” I said. I had heard she got accepted to Penn State on a partial scholarship to study accounting. She was my good friend with super-duper smarts. I was going to miss her.

“I have my university orientation next week in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, and immediately after that I’ll start the school term there,” she said. “I won’t be back here until after the school year is completed in the spring,” she added.

“Look at you, sounding all educated and what not and with all that head on yo’ shoulders,” I said teasing her.

“Shut up, Todd!” Samantha said while grinning from ear to ear.

I was happy for her. We had spent a lot of time together as kids since we were in the same grade. Samantha had set her sights high on achieving an education, leaving me in the dust with my lack of a high school diploma and no job prospects.

Samantha continued, “What’s your plans?”

“I’m about to go upstairs and study for my good-enough diploma. Maybe I can become a doctor and marry

you someday,” I said, as we both laughed. “You want to join me for some one-on-one counseling?” I asked, enjoying her company.

Laughing, she answered, “You’re a psycho! Get out of here you fresh boy!” “You’ll get it together one day.”

Ronnie, a neighborhood acquaintance who was very butch, and another masculine girl, pulled up next to me on their bikes. “What’s poppin?” Ronnie asked. “You got a light, sis?” Ronnie asked as she motioned toward Samantha.

I answered for Samantha, “Nah, she don’t smoke.”

Ronnie and the girl slammed their bikes down belligerently and the masculine girl bellowed, “Who theis talkin’ to you, patna?”

I smiled at her aggression and thought to myself “This female looks and acts as if she were a big dude.”

Ronnie asked Samantha in a lewd manner, “Ms. Fine, can we get somethin’ going?”

Samantha strongly rejected her advances and answered, “NO! YOU CANNOT!”

“Why you frontin?” I asked in order to divert Ronnie away from my friend then quickly intervened and added, “She ain’t like that!” I stepped in between the two butch girls.

“BAMMM!” Without warning Ronnie punched Samantha right in the mouth. Samantha dropped down to the ground and Ronnie jumped on top of her knocking her head from side to side with punches. The other masculine

girl jumped into the fray and was also pounding Samantha with her fists. Samantha was crying. I was frozen with shock! Neighbors looked on as if what they saw was entertainment.

“Nobody’s gonna do nothing’?” I loudly asked the crowd. “Y’all just gonna stand there and watch these females beat Samantha?” The girls were beating Samantha senseless. Being on parole I held back hoping someone else would intervene. Since no one else intervened to help Samantha I shouted, “Get out of the way!” and aggressively began to stop the attack.

I pulled Ronnie off of Samantha and pushed her away from her. The other girl was on her hands and knees and I pushed her on to the ground with slight force. I felt like beating her and Ronnie, but any repercussions would affect my parole. As I shrugged my shoulders I said aloud to the crowd with disgust, “Sh..t!”

“That’s word, but on my set you gonna feel something!” Ronnie warned as she got up off the ground.

There wasn’t any way to avoid the situation. It just happened and escalated when Samantha turned down Ronnie’s proposal. What was I supposed to do when they damn near beat and stomped Samantha unconscious?

The scene was upsetting, unwanted and unwarranted. After the ruckus with Ronnie and the other girl, I realized Samantha left and was nowhere in sight. Once the commotion ended the neighbors scattered like roaches acting as if they didn’t see a damn thing unusual.

I called out in anger to the crowd, “Y’all a bunch a

drama-seeking, nosey asses!” I said aloud wondering, “What the hell is going on around here?” The entire town was in an uproar, with so much turmoil. What was causing the crisis in the community that led to total mayhem? I just couldn’t fathom what the cause was or why.

That evening I went out and sat on one of the project benches and soon noticed a family fighting with a gang of dudes. “These fools are wildin’, I said aloud and made a U-turn back to the apartment. There seemed to be nothing but trouble in the streets, something I had to stay away from while on parole. I couldn’t concentrate fully on studying for my degree because I needed a job.

The following day I put my mind in motion and hit the pavement running to try to do some serious job hunting. I figured you can always find employment in the City and besides I wanted a change of scenery from the chaos that was happening in the projects. I spent hours and hours of time filling out applications. I even tried for some jobs in the restaurant business. I had to get a job because the circumstances were getting worse each day. I knew if I wanted to stay out of difficulty, I had to find a job or go to school.

Sundown was approaching when I headed home on the train thinking about the disadvantages my parents had and their deprived childhood. I shook off the thoughts and reminded myself to not dwell on the obstacles the ones that gave me life had faced. I believed I had to make it out of the wilderness alone and no one else was going to help or lead the way.

I was different and I wanted a difference in where I

lived and a change from my upbringing. No more repeating my mistakes, no more chaos where I lived.

Walking up the block to my apartment building, I spotted Ronnie from afar on a bicycle. She acted like she didn't see me, but I felt her negative vibes. When I got upstairs, my brother was just leaving the apartment.

“Yo, where you going?” I asked Anthony.

“To the back park with Bam to see if we can get a game going,” he replied. Over the years as we got older our relationship changed. It became, “You hang with your friends and I’ll hang with my friends” unspoken sort of thing. Like all siblings, we had our rivalry moments. We would get into a boxing match, but his frustrations never matched my temperament. He was born first and I was born second and he would occasionally say to me, “Forever the middle child.”

I stared out of my project window and realized that our apartment was damn abandoned with not a whisper, not even a peep. Mom was constantly bugged out and not making much sense.

Always coming in at the wee hours of the night, she needed to be saved. “Debra needs Jesus, and I need some fresh air,” talking out loud to myself, “and it’s August and it’s summertime-fine out here.” I took a stroll to the corner store to get some neighborhood snacks—a quarter and a bag of chips.

As I came out of the store, I saw Ronnie again. Was she following me? It sure felt like it. “Let me take my mind off that girl,” I thought. “You know what they say, you have

to speak it into existence, but not that kind of girl. I don't want that girl, but she was kind of cute and all, a tomboy for real."

The next day the heat was sweltering in the midst of an August heat wave. I was crossing the street near the park and I felt the sun penetrating the back of my shirt.

"What's poppin'?" a guy from the neighborhood asked. "What happened with you fam?" he questioned. Not responding, I thought I would just let him talk.

He continued and asked, "With Ronnie?" He was either super high or drunk to even approached me about her.

"Damn! He's in the same gang!" I told myself, instantly making the connection.

BAM! He sucker punched me. He tried to punch me a second time but didn't connect. I took a few steps back then went in for the massacre. I tried to figure out if he was serious or playing. I think he thought we were slap boxing. I sized him up and immediately went for the bum rush. We were testing each other's strength and strategy. I knew if I moved in any way he would knock me off my balance.

"Oh, shit, Todd gettin' into it right now!" said an onlooker who noticed the event from the courts.

"Nah, they just wrestling," said my onlooker brother Anthony. "Check up!" Once I got a good grasp of his clothing, I pulled him up off his feet and threw him down, head first. The humbling scream from him getting tossed up and falling down echoed toward the basketball court.

“Oh, damn! Anthony said, as he took long strides to get to Todd.

I was going to continue the beating with a stopper, but I didn't bother since humiliating him for acting aggressive toward me made him look foolish. Woozy from the battle, he got up from the ground and dusted himself off and shouted as he retreated,

“You got meup, fam,” shouting as he retreated.

“Your not built for that type of action!” I yelled back to him.

“Well damn! That escalated quickly,” Bam said. He and Anthony arrived late to what had become neighborhood entertainment. Anthony asked with an edge of concern,

“Did you just flip that guy over? Impressive! How that happened?” Anthony asked.

“It started the other day, first with Ronnie, now this!” I answered. I started swinging my hands while shadow boxing with the air to show how aggravated I was with these recent events. I noticed that the people we knew from our neighborhood were with the guy I beat up and humiliated.

“The atmosphere is chaotic and anybody can get attacked! Ya' hear, ANYBODY!” I shouted with concern. It seemed the entire neighborhood was forming a ring around us.

“Y'all gonna get the same treatment I got” the guy said to the crowd, but really warning me.

“Even fam,” another bro said. “It’s gonna be a nice christening.”

A group of guys who were also friends with Ronnie attacked me, Anthony and Bam, then quickly left.

From the beginning until the end I felt nothing but pain, excruciating pain from my knuckles from every punch, my ribs from each and every deliberate stomp. It was a long aching night. Come morning the discomfort didn’t subside. I was in so much pain. Just opening my eyes made me cringe.

After what felt like an eternity, I finally rolled out of bed and damn near crawled to the bathroom. I looked in the mirror at a huge scrape on the left side of my face. “AAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHH!” I screamed in rage. The cuts on the side of my face were horrendous. I grabbed the strap and headed for the front door. “I’m gonna kill them!”

I screamed and blew profanities under my breath. I jumped the fence and proceeded across the grass. I was after anyone that took part in jumping us! Anybody! In my frustration I was holding the pistol out in the open! I was losing it!

I snapped out of my recklessness and concealed the weapon and began searching in a rampage. I went past the corner store, and asked an old timer,

“You seen Ronaldo?”

“No, sir, I have not,” he relied.

I knocked on some of my friend’s doors. “Good morning, Ms. Sheila,” I politely asked, “Is Ronnie home?”

Sheila noticed the scrapes and bruises all over my face.

She replied using her daughter's full name, "Rashida Sanford is sleeping at this moment. Shouldn't you be doing the same? You all right, child? You care for some of these hominy grits?" she offered holding the pot.

"No, thank you, mam." I left and shot down the staircase on the hunt. After knocking on more doors, it seemed as if everyone, who kicked our asses, was still sleeping. I didn't checked Ronaldo's home. I asked someone else who hadn't seen him either. I decided to go back home. Before I pressed the elevator button, I suddenly changed my mind and took the stairs.

I was having second thoughts about taking the staircase because Ronaldo lived on the 9th floor. After knocking on many apartment doors on different floors I was winded when I got to Ronaldo's home. The entire building had doorknockers, but his mother was different. She had a doorbell, which was classier, I guess. I rang the doorbell and Mrs. Pat came to the door.

"Good Morning, Todd. What happened to you?" she asked concerned at seeing the bruises all over my exposed skin. I just smiled and did not answer her. "He's back there, sleeping. Go wake him up," she said.

I knocked on the bedroom door and found him lying next to his babe. His babe saw the look on my face and said, "I'm gonna let y'all talk," and she quickly left the room.

He sat up, "What's good?" as if he didn't have anything to do with last night.

“I want some answers,” I demanded.

He replied, “Huh, answers, answers...man, we all we got, all we got IS US! What theyou mean you want answers, bro?” he asked.

“I just want an explanation, that’s all,” I said.

Slowly he shook his head and said, “I don’t have to explain anything. You don’t get it. That was the kickoff,” he grabbed a cigarette and continued, “but soon you’ll wake up.” He lit a loosie and we stared at each other until I broke my stare. I got up and walked out the door, clueless to what happened that night.

The attack was a riddle. I walked down the staircase to the seventh floor Three-plain clothes detectives appeared with their guns out.

“Get against the wall” one of them ordered. They searched me and found the pistol I was concealing.

“Damn,” I thought, “damn, damn, damn.”

Home for only two months, I was back on Rikers Island again. This time I was detained for two months before appearing before a judge. Thankfully the ballistic test on the gun showed that the pistol was damaged. Instead of serving four more years in prison I was sentenced to eight months on Rikers Island, which is considered one year in jail. In jail slang it was called a city bid, or eight months on Rikers.

Chapter 13 : PUPPY LOVE

May 1998



"**Y**ou not fly! You not fly!" my man, Rich Broke, was dragging it with his sarcastic laughter. "How dress is my manner of style, which means rags and riches." He was exuberant, wearing gray sweats and completing his jogging pants with a red sweater, minus the sleeves, compliments of Gucci with junk jewelry everywhere.

On that spring day I was definitely HIM—blue-colored Bo Jackson sneakers, custom designed by Nike Air, along with matching ankle socks to complete the finest footwear. Complimenting the sneakers were dirty denim shorts and a blue baseball jersey that advertised "Mariners" across the chest, and all this topped off with heavily draped gold chains around my neck along with a heavy Cuban model necklace. There was no need for a heavy bracelet, just an ordinary timepiece to compliment my wrist.

"Yo! You stupid! You stupid!" Rich yelled.

After contemplating a come back, I responded, "Yo! Go back upstairs. You look unfinished wit'cha unfinished jogging suit on! "Our peers laughed at our sense of humor.

"Where you get that from, Conway?" I asked laughing

out loud and pointing at his pants.

Rich's mood changed sensing he was the object of ridicule now that I was taunting him back while others were laughing. Condescendingly he pointed at me saying, "This dude. This dude, here." Rich Broke was mad—Debra mad ugly—sucking his teeth. Rich Broke went nut-so, making joke after crazy joke.

"Your mom's so ugly she scared the blind, crippled and crazy away," Rich Broke quickly embraced the high fives from his homies. I thought that it was time to counter him and said,

"Yo! Your mom's so old she went to the antique shop and they kept her dirty ass!" I said. All the dope boys busted out laughing.

My brother, who added his two cents worth, said, "Your mom's so ugly, not even her Rice Krispies will crackle for her." No one laughed for two to three seconds, and then they started laughing at my brother's lame-ass joke.

Drawing my attention away from the stupid jokes, I saw them walking from afar. As the two young women approached us, both were of average height, 5'5" to 5'6". Both had sex appeal with the dark skin aglow showing nice complexions. Their skin was radiant from head to toe. One of them had on jeans. The other wore a short miniskirt to reveal plenty of skin. Both were much the same. As I was looking for a winner, not a sinner, I knew coming from this locale they were probably a mixture of both.

As a group, we laid down different catcalls when the

ladies walked past. "Tandem two, can I holla' at y'all for a sec. Summatime Fine, make you mine, make you mine. Is that two midgets in your back pockets, hot damnnnn!" One dude hollered out Tyrese Gibson's lyrics of "Sweet Lady."

"Sweet lady would you be my sweet love for a lifetime

I'll be there when you need me

Just call and receive me, sweet lady."

I looked at the girls and thought, "You're stretching it, dog. It's not that serious." However, it sure was the thrill of the chase.

"Hey, slow down, now. Can I have a conversation with you?" I called to one of the girls.

Liking the attention that she was receiving, along with my welcoming demeanor, I began by saying, "I saw you from wayyyy back there.

"I was trying to think of something to say without fumbling. "You have an amazing smile," That forced her to let me take in the sight of her ever-present glowing skin.

"Thank you," she said

Short mini-skirts were a dime a dozen, but with a touch of thoroughbred filly in her legs and walk, she could make a grown man cry. I extended my hand, "Your name is?" I asked. A slight smile from her face came from my revealing a casual crooked grin. "Gale. My name is Gale," she answered twice.

I said my name once, "Todd, nice to meet you, Gale. I

like you all ready."

"Why you say that?" she asked with curiosity.

"Your first initial in your name is a G," I replied.

"And, what does that suppose to mean?" I sensed a little attitude in her feisty response.

"You're someone who keeps it real. Do you mind if I keep the emphasis on the first initial G?" I asked

She liked that.

"No, I don't mind. Nobody ever kept it simple for me," she said.

Truth be told, the name Gale sounded like someone who was old. I liked that she preferred to bump it down a notch. We were walking and suddenly the tempo sped up

"Where're you rushing to?" I asked being nosy, wanting to know more.

"To the train station," they simultaneously replied followed by gusts of laughter.

"We're going to the City where everything is happening," the one with the cut-up jeans said.

"Why go to the City when everything is happening before you?" I asked as I laid my mack down.

The two girls busted out laughing again.

"Here in nowhere-land? I'll take my chances in Manhattan where there is a lesser chance that I'll get shot or stabbed," Gale said sarcastically.

I guess I had to speed the game pace up.

"I like you," I loudly called out.

Gale looked around in wonder.

"Who me?" she asked, knowing damn well I was talking to her. "Well, there are two girls here," she said rolling her eyes toward her friend.

"In that case, I won't mind taking you out as a tandem," I said smoothly, "as long as there are special activities at the end of the evening."

Her friend starred me up and down and was obviously thinking about the tandem date. Gale switched her happy-go-lucky demeanor to what I just said.

"You think your slick, but you're not!" answered Gale trying to act mad.

I wasn't taking "no" for an answer from her, even with all the fast walking.

"You're going to take me out for dinner!" I taunted boldly.

"*Not in your damn lifetime,*" Gale answered with an edge of laughter.

"Can we exchange numbers?" I asked her nicely.

Gale didn't hesitate to give me her number, saying,

"Well, only for conversational purpose."

As I handed her my Motorola StarTAC phone, she appeared fascinated by the very petite object.

"You have a cell phone!" she said in awe.

I answered nonchalantly, "Yea, everyone on my team

has one."

As a first-time experience and with my help, she delicately input her number in my handheld phone and handed it back to me and then began moving token in the turnstile as the train was approaching!

"Call me tonight."

Four months later in October, I went shopping at Forever 21 for change-of-season style statements in

anticipation of colder weather. I wanted to treat myself to a couple of Ralph Lauren teddy bear signature sweaters and two Coogi sweaters to keep up with the Joneses. I was trying to save money from my pharmaceutical engineer job. Coogi and Polo sweaters were not cheap.

Gale worked at the store and got an employee discount and was working there that day. I would get the sweaters for the low. The men's sweater department at the store was highly congested and chaotic. I found the sweaters I wanted and got on line to pay for them. In the same long line, I watched two customers ahead of me create an interesting scene.

"Excuse me! Excuse me! Excuse me, Ms. Lady!" a rather slim middle-aged man screamed and the sound carried across the store. *"Excuse me, Ms. Lady, you hear me talking to you?"* Reaching the woman he was calling out to, he saw she was no shrinking violet. She was large and tall. He approached her from the side and she was in front of him acting as if she didn't understand he was calling to her. The man thought she was probably ignorant as all hell.

Realizing he wasn't going to go away, she rolled her eyes and sounding annoyed asked,

“What you want, boy?” “You calling me like you know me from somewhere,” she said and continued, “Where you know me from? WHERE? You don't know me from a can of paint!” she explained, then fully turned to look at him thinking she was done with this lame ass man.

“Shit, damn! You *are* feisty!” having decided to drop his tone down many decibels he almost whispered, which was in extreme contrast from his earlier loud screaming.

“I truly apologize. I didn't mean any harm,” he said oozing with charm.

“You could've fooled me. I was about to put your ass in a straight jacket!” the woman flippantly responded, a slight smile emerging on her face. Her demeanor changed instantly.

“Wow! A women who can make me laugh!” the guy said and stuck his hand out to introduce himself. “Hi! I'm Ricardo, but you can call me Ricky,” he said, followed by a closed-mouth smile.

The woman looked him up and down and said, “My Daddy said to never trust a man with a closed-mouth smile,” she said.

“Why that?” Ricardo asked.

“His teeth are probably fucked up and he has bad breath! Halitosis!” she said. After really looking at him, she suddenly appeared to be attracted to Ricardo. She eagerly embraced his grip with a wide-open smile showing all of

her teeth.

“My name is Bertha May. You can call me Bertha,”.

“Did you say Berth-a-may?” he asked drawling out her name, thinking she had an old-ass name.

“Yes, Lord. My daddy named me that,” she answered adding an mmm-mm and raising her left eyebrow.

“COME ON NOW! Y’ALL HOLDING US UP!” an irate customer on the line called out. The long line of customers was getting antsy. _

“YEAH! SERIOUSLY, GET A ROOM!” someone else on line called out.

“Oh-oh, you talking to me, you talking to me?” Bertha May shouted at the two hecklers.

“Yea, YOU!” the heckler shouted back and continued, “I see you used to that Welfare line, shuckin’ and jivin’ all day!”

Bertha May turned around to face the hecklers and couldn’t believe she was being ridiculed in public.

“Lady, what you need to do is get to steppin’ and get cho’ welfare check!” said the heckler on the line.

You gonna let him bark on me like that?” Bertha May asked Richardo.

“Here’s your change, sir, and thank you for shopping at Foreva 21,” said the store clerk.

“YOU SKIPPED INTO THE LINE IN FRONT OF ME!” Bertha May bellowed.

Ricardo looked on foolishly.

“OH, HELL NAW! Y’ALL PICKED THE WRONG ONE TODAY!” Bertha May shouted.

“Sorry for the skip, but I have to go. See me when I see you. Call me.” Ricardo snatched his receipt and rushed off.

“I don’t have your number, fool!” Bertha May shouted feeling embarrassed and ridiculed.

I spotted Gale behind the registers,

“Looking for me?” Gale asked, as she was finishing up her work shift. She reached over the counter and I handed her the sweaters.

“It’s a frenzy in here. Can we leave now?” I begged.

It was her turn to pay the clerk, but Bertha May faced the line behind her and said,

“Listen here, Mister! I don’t appreciate you calling out to me like that. What the hell is wrong with you? What are you, an emina?” Bertha May asked the heckler. Frustration reeking from her pores.

“Wha’cha just get off, the short yellow bus?” asked the heckler. “It’s enema, not emina, whole ass!” the heckler barked.

“Hold up! Did you just curse at me, homeboy?” Bertha May replied not sure of what she just heard. “Did you? DID YOU?”

“AND,” admitted the heckler with a smirk on his face.

“OH, NO! THAT’S FIGHTING WORDS TO ME!

LET ME AT HIM!” Bertha May shouted.

The heckler had a grin of satisfaction on his face knowing he pissed Bertha May off.

The department store was in total chaos.

“Gale, let’s get out of here,” I said.

She delicately placed the sweaters in the bag and replied, “I am so ready.”

“DON’T HOLD ME BACK! DON’T HOLD ME BACK!” shouted Bertha May as three men struggled to stop her from attacking her heckler.

“Somebody get security! SECURITY!” a clerk screamed.

We made it out just in time as security arrived. Soon after we left Foreva 21 was in shambles.

Standing at Fulton Street train station waiting for a train, “That was completely out-of-control! What happened?” Gale asked.

“You got me,” I responded not up for telling the entire event. Gale shoved me.

“Hey, hey, hey, watch it now. I could sue you for \$900 million for that nudge,” I said jokingly.

“Boy, you barely know how to count to a hundred,” she said humorously as the A-Train pulled into the station. We didn’t get to Gale’s apartment until midnight and her mother was at a formal dinner with her boyfriend. Her mom didn’t get home until 2:00 or 3:00 pm the next day, so we had the apartment to ourselves.

In time Gale's mother granted me the privilege of staying the night every so often. A few months went by and Gale started vomiting everywhere and at any time. We bought a pregnancy test at a pharmacy. Gale came out of the bathroom looking at the test results. She was 2-months pregnant! We were shocked! I didn't know what to do or say.

When Gale was three month's pregnant, we decided if the baby was a girl, Gale would name her, and if it was a boy, the name would be left up to me.

A week after my 19th birthday, Gale went into labor. I didn't know what to do, or what to expect. She called me on the phone talking about centimeters and a lot of other things I didn't understand one bit.

The baby was about to arrive! Anxiety overwhelmed me as I rushed to Gale's hospital room. While still in the throes of labor, Gale was mad as hell and screaming out obscenities from her pain. Her mother and other female family members were in the room helping her get through each round of labor pain.

I stood in the background, stunned at the miracle happening before my eyes.

The doctor came into the room, ready to help deliver the baby and asked me,

“You the father?”

Nearly catatonic I barely mumbled, “Yeah.” In minutes a baby boy was born. It was July 24th! As we agreed months earlier, I got to name him. We named him Todd, Jr

Chapter 14 : VIVID MEMORIES

January 1999



“Where ya’ headed?” asked the cab driver.

I said, “85 Lawrence Avenue.” My uncle had summoned me and I was on my way. Otherwise, I would’ve stayed in Edgemere Projects on Saturday night. I caught a taxi to Inwood, Long Island. The odd thing is that Far Rockaway, which is a part of the Borough of Queens, borders on ‘Inwood and Lawrence that are a part of Long Island. This part of Long Island cuts into Queens and separates the borough.

Once you cross into Long Island, rules and regulations change as far as property value, curfew restrictions and the law. Nassau and Suffolk counties handed out stiff legal penalties to offenders and I wasn’t going there to get into trouble.

My plan was to attend the Borough of Manhattan Community College, which I had completed testing and was accepted. I also had a job at Toys “R” Us and was part of the overnight staff. I was making a new and better way for myself.

I got out of the taxi in front of my uncle’s place and opened the side entrance to go upstairs. I jiggled the doorknob, which hadn’t been working for quite some time.

I jiggled it again and said aloud, “Come on, come on. Yeah!” and the door opened. I took off my jacket then hurried downstairs as if I was missing something.

I opened the main entrance door to ‘The Shop,’ as my uncle called it. Here, cards and big-time gambling games occurred and there were two poker machines in the room, as well. It was a place that drew an up-in-age crowd.

Rarely on the weekends the players’ ages came down a little to 45 or maybe 35.

A ton of smoke surrounded the card table. I wasn’t a fan of cigarettes and cigars, but I might as well have been.

A lady came in ‘The Shop’ accompanied by a much younger woman. They could have been sisters.

“Hey everybody, this is my daughter, Stacy.” The daughter looked annoyed at her mother’s introduction.

“Mom, don’t do that! Why you have to embarrass me and yourself like that?” Stacy asked.

“I’m not embarrassed! You my daughter,” Susan said. “I made you, you didn’t make me!” she answered with an I-am-your-mother tone.

“When we get in public you always doing that!” Stacy complained.

Susan quickly interjected, “That’s right! You my biggest blessing, my daughter. If you don’t like that, oh well,” Susan responded seriously sassy. At least she had way more words than my mom.

Stacy, feeling shamefaced and uncomfortable with her

mother's remarks, headed toward the door where I was standing and I stopped her.

“Don't you dislike over-aggressive parents?” I asked her. From afar Susan gave me looks that could kill. “Let's get some air,” I suggested to Stacy. I felt I understood what she was feeling.

“Lets!” Stacy answered, shaking her head in agreement.

I guided her over the train tracks, which led to the more opulent homes of the well-kempt lawns, as opposed to behind us where broken bottles laid and broken-down stores and houses were—both areas within the same town yet vastly different. We spent the evening with her mostly venting about how much she disliked her life. I was there to shine the light on every complaint she mentioned trying to help her be grateful for, and appreciate, what she had.

“Hey, look at it like this,” I said, while I was thinking about what I was about to spit out and that it better be good, “you're young and you have plenty going for you. You're smart and talented, you have good intentions, and you're beautiful.”

Stacy looked surprised and said, “No one has ever spoken to me like that before!”

“You have great assets, Stacy, and I'm here to help you become aware of who you are and help you open up for the entire world to see what I see.” I sincerely meant what I told Stacy, wanting to give her encouragement and uplifting her to be the very best she could be. “The world ain't that bad. Besides, you have all your teeth!” Stacy

showed me a remarkable smile that she didn't know she possessed.

As we began to head back to The Shop, Stacy seemed to relax and enjoy the moment, and laugh. They say that laughter nourishes the soul, and she needed plenty of it. We stayed for hours and went upstairs to get more comfortable.

From that night on it seemed that Stacy and I were inseparable. We had a lot going on between the two of us. She started working at an auto body shop as a painter. I was busy with enrolling in college and working at Toys "R" Us at night. Whenever we weren't busy, we would meet up.

Chapter 15 : TWO JOBS: ONE DAY, ONE NIGHT

April 1999



I got a job working at The Chocolate Factory. “Willy Wonkers,” is what my brother called it. It was on Beach 98th Street in Far Rockaway. I was 19 years old and it was my first job! I was proud of myself. About 7:30 a.m. I took the going-down van to work. Aahh ehhh, I liked the sound of “work,” or “my place of business,” or better yet, “my place of employment!”

I was the “proud employee” of The Chocolate Factory. The hours were from 8:00 in the morning to 4:00 in the afternoon. I was using the job as a shield in case I got caught by the Jake selling drugs. My work: The Chocolate Factory by day, drug pusher by night. I started off great with both jobs.

When I arrived at my day job I would first put on my uniform—an all-white top and bottom made of cotton and a black net cap. This cap wasn’t new to me. Back when I was a little boy, my mom had jerry curls. She used to leave her jerry juice caps around the house. I would wear them at night to cultivate my waves when she went out on a date.

In the morning I stocked the chocolate by the holidays:

Easter chocolate had its place, Valentine's Day chocolate was arranged in another area, holidays like Thanksgiving and Christmas had a large section where the novelties were also stored. My next job was to scan the conveyor belt containing novelties looking for anything that needed to be removed before shipping.

Lunch was thirty minutes exactly, or more like twenty-five minutes for the reason you had to clean up after you ate. There wasn't time to go out to another store or lollygag. You worked, took your twenty-five-minute lunch break, and back to making the chocolate. Yup, that was my job. For seven and a half hours per day, five days a week working this job I was paid the minimum wage of \$5.15 an hour.

When I got off from work, I took a cab every day to wherever I was going, five days a week. I usually went home, took a nap, and got prepared for the night hours. Time to make some "real" money.

Macaroni Joe, he introduced me to the soft game. I already was selling hard candy. However, I stopped with hard and changed to soft and began dealing with an upper echelon of clientele. My daily routine: chocolate work by day, pharmaceutical engineer by night. Macaroni Joe told me, "

You stay outta trouble. No more territory wars, gettin' into beefs and shit. Just focus on

you. You don't have no time for the nonsense. All you gotta do is when you re-up let me test what you working with. Ya' know you don't wanna be walkin' 'round with a

bad batch of bullshit. Ya' know what I'm sayin'?" This last phrase is how Macaroni Joe ended every conversation with me.

Macaroni Joe had a lotta game. He could sell water to a whale when he was on top of his sport. However, he warned me when in the game, "You never get high on your own supply."

This warning was based on his own experience. He took a bad fall when he woke up in an Atlantic City hotel room, buck-naked, with his face in thirty grams of snow. "Bitches ain't shit. They left me and took my whole supply," he told me.

Rumor was Macaroni Joe had a couple of kegs, too, and was high on alcohol and drugs. The three renegades he was with at the hotel turned on him once they saw he was a lush. They saw him like Scarface, snorting his aspirations away. They took his kegs and the rest of his drugs and left the hotel room. It was pretty thoughtful how the ladies left him with thirty-sprinkled grams, a little over an ounce. He told me that story whenever he was out of luck or thinking of a come up

Thursday, Friday and Saturday nights, I was busy as hell. I knew I had to re-up on Wednesday because, from experience, I knew I would have a busy three days. Sometimes I couldn't predict the amount I would sell. I started out with one hundred grams a week but soon it wasn't enough. I'd have to re-up again to get more.

Eventually, I started getting my own quarter of a key. That's two hundred and fifty grams or almost nine ounces!

If a client wanted weight, he had to put an order in with me before Wednesday. That's how I had it set up.

One Friday night I had just got back to the trap house from the Bronx and uptown. I was baggin' up some \$20s for regular clients, and some \$50s for the large user clients.

BAM, BAM! BAM, BAM, BAM!

Oh, shit, the shots came from the back building. I spilled cocaine on the floor. I was livid! "Damn, I hope somebody got the business," I said aloud to myself. I'd spilled over fifty grams!

After the cops left, I went to headquarters in the back building. I noticed a kid about to leave. He was a dude from the other side who I knew when we were kids in elementary school.

"Yo, come here for a second," I said. He was looking around suspiciously. I said to him, "The Jake left already, no need to panic."

He said, "It wasn't the Jake firing. I just finished testing this hammer out, making sure it lego!" Trying to sound like a hot boy, while all along he was killing clouds, making the sky mad, and now me mad, too.

"Okay, let me see that," saying it like I hadn't seen a gun in my entire life. I was shocked that he actually gave me the pistol. I carefully examined it and it was .380 caliber. I saw one when I was watching an episode of "Matlock." Referred to as a lady's pistol, a female was shooting it at her husband. "This is clean," I said, referring to how the gun looked. "It's small, but you can put a hurting on a

motherfucker,” I said.

“All right, it’s hot out here,” the idiot said realizing that shooting the gun on this side of the projects was dangerous. Enraged, I hit him with the butt of the pistol. “Oh, shit, what you doing?” the stunned fool asked.

“For the reason it’s hot out here!” I yelled. “Shootin’ at the ...clouds! Yo, get the ...outta here before I put a cop on your ass,” I said menacingly.

He ran to Duck project, or the other side, holding his fivehead where I struck him. It was a love tap. If he thinks I was going to give the gun back to him, he was dead mistaken. Monday night, chillin’ with the homies in front of our project building, having a good time mockin’ with the team. It was the beginning of spring and what a beautiful night it was. A butch female sprinted out of the building listening to Notorious B.I.G rap,

“I let my tape rock 'til my tape popped. Smoking weed on Bambu, sippin' on Private Stock.” Yeah, Biggie Smalls was a bad man. Had lyrics for days, and days.

I noticed Daniel and Ham-Hog were coming from Duck. When he reached me, he asked, “What’s, boy? Can I speak to you for one minute?” Big Boy, one of my homies, was watching intently and knew there was heat around just in case he had to get down. “One of my soldiers got disrespected over here. Said it

was one of you that did it. Who, old boy, who disrespect my flow?”

I wasn’t one to back down, “Yeah, I did it!” I said. Now

I was at attention.

“I mean, you know, I understand that, and we don’t have a problem with that,” said Daniel.

Big Boy was giving me the signal,

“Let me know if it’s a go. All hands on deck! Take ‘em in the building and handle ‘em. We just want our hammer back, that’s all,” Daniel said dryly.

“That shit is dead!” I said, “and you not getting that hammer back.”

“Alright,” Ham-Hog replied.

They backed off. Big Boy warned, “You shoulda laid dat nigga out in the building, straight like that.”

After that, all hell broke loose.

Chapter 16 : THE OTHER SIDE

May 1, 1999



Just like that I was laid off from The Chocolate Factory, Willie Wonkers! “Why am I getting fired when I just got started?” I asked the supervisor.

“Well, you are inexperienced and besides you are young. How old are you, 19, 20? People have families to support and you don’t. You’ll get over this sooner than you think,” the supervisor answered. “Here you go,” he said, as he handed me a check. I earned \$181.22 working at Willie Wonkers for a week. It was a lame excuse and I’d never know the real reason I was laid off.

My grandmother told me, “Always show appreciation and gratitude and your blessing will be yours in abundance. And do as God says.”

“Thank you,” I said as I took the check, then shook the supervisor’s hand. And that was that. It was difficult for me to take that blow, but I smiled, gathered my things, and left. I decided to go shopping! That’s how I was going to start my day over on Jamaica Avenue enjoying the sights. When I made it home, there was no use taking a shower for the reason I didn’t work. I had been “fired” from The Chocolate Factory. Wait ‘til I tell my brother about this

one! I can hear him now,

“How you get fired so soon?” Oh, yah, he was going to have a field day with this one. I threw on my sweat pants and was headed to Mott Avenue. “Let me get a cab,” I said to myself and dialed the phone in my apartment.

“Hello. Where to?” a young girl asked. That was Willa I was speaking to at the local cab 4cabstand, a name I made up.

“How you doing, Willa? This is T. I’m right by you at 56-10 Beach Channel Drive and want to go to Mott Avenue.” I explained.

“Okay, Sweetie, come downstairs to the street. The cab is headed your way right now,” she said.

I was at the front of my building curb asap I had been punctual at the job I no longer had and I wanted to continue being punctual. The cab was right on time. I hopped in the cab and gave the driver an extra \$20.00 telling the cabby not to pick up other fares along the way, the normal practice in the area surrounding the projects.

I began thinking how I had to find another job because it kept me off the streets during the day. The routine I had before I got fired worked well: I arrived at Willie Wonkers at 8:00 a.m. and was done at 4:00 p.m. I left work and usually went straight home. As soon as I got home, I took a catnap, then bagged up¹ and was ready by 10:00 p.m., just in time for my second job—grinding. My day and night ran like clockwork, a set schedule—The Chocolate

19 Ready for sale

Factory by day pharmaceutical engineer by night.

“Stop right here in front of Ralph’s Diner,” I told the cabby. I got out of the cab and walked to a van stop on Mott Avenue where it merges with Rockaway Turnpike. The van was going to Jamaica Avenue where I was headed.

I had cashed my check on my way home from The Chocolate Factory, so I was set and ready to go on my way. It was nearing 2:30 p.m. and I had to have something to eat first. I walked across a parking lot into McDonalds and started to place my order. “Yeah, let me get, ah, two McChicken sandwiches, ah, as a matter of fact, let me get the McMeal, and iced tea with that,” I said.

“Will that be all?” the female clerk asked, smiling like TV personality, Vanna White.

“No, actually, I’ll have you on the side as dessert,” I said smoothly. She chuckled. “Excuse me,” I said trying to think of something quick, “I don’t mean no harm, but did your man tell you how gorgeous you are today?” She started smiling.

“Oh, thank you. I don’t have a man,” she replied.

“Yeah, girl, you looking like a drumstick,” I said.

“What?” She didn’t understand.

“You know, scrumptious and shit,” I replied.

She started laughing. “You’re funny,” she said.

“I’m funny?” I asked as we bantered back and forth
“Does that pretty smile come with a name?” I asked.

“It’s Sharon, but my close friends call me Shar,” she

answered showing interest.

Black people always tryin' to be different," I said. "Just be Sharon."

"Boy, get out!" she said laughing.

I was her friend now. "Please to meet you, Sharon. My name is Todd. Are you a student?"

"As a matter of fact, I am."

I was in good with beautiful Sharon. This can be an everlasting friendship. "I was thinking," I said.

"Oh, that's nice, you were thinking."

"Oh, now you're funny. I see you have a sense of humor," I responded with a smile.

"Hurry up! I've been waiting on this line forever," someone called out behind me.

"I was wondering if you can tutor me for a couple of hours, that's if your man allows you to?" I asked, stalling for my order to be placed.

"I told you, I don't have a boyfriend. I'm too busy at school and I work," she replied. But maybe I can find a little bit of time for you."

Bingo! I started dancing in my head, "Oh, okay. Well, I can gain some knowledge on your behalf, and, you know, we can learn about each other," I said while thinking, "Ohhhh, yaah!"

"That sounds nice," she said.

We exchanged numbers. Sharon was smiling. Someone

blurted out behind me, “Hallelujah!”

“Damn. Now you can process my order,” I said. The customers behind were frustrated from my holding up the line. “Patience is a virtue,” I said loudly with my back to the customers as I smiled from ear to ear looking at Sharon.

“No! The hell it ain’t! Sounds like a bootie call to me,” a man in the line behind me said loudly. All the customers laughed. “Next time, marry her,” the same guy said. We had a comedian among us and I was glad he was entertaining the customers while I admired Sharon.

People were angry, so I got my bag of food and hurried out of the place showing Sharon one last big smile. It was the first day of spring, and many folks were outdoors. I walked out the door of McDonalds and headed to the van stop across the street from the parking lot. I saw three dudes, but I didn’t get bad vibes. As I got nearer, wha’da’ya know, it was the three Duck boys!

“What up? Long time no see,” one of them said with heavy sarcasm.

I was cornered. “What’s poppin’?” I asked, nervous but trying not to show it.

“Ya’ll niggas already know the deal,” one of them said with menace.

“GET AWAY FROM ME! GET AWAY FROM ME!” I yelled, afraid of what they might do, even in broad daylight. The three of them moved closer. I looked back and forth, and yelled again, “GET AWAY FROM ME!” as I backed away.

WHAM! The gunshot that hit me sounded like a loud, high-pitched crack followed by several more gunshots.

“They shootin’! They shootin’!” I heard someone scream near me.

When you get shot, you don’t hear the sound, but everyone else around you hears it. I had been shot smack in the center of my abdomen. The impact of the bullet felt as though I had been hit with a sledgehammer. I fell back two steps. I felt extreme heat inside me. I staggered slowly. The slug in my abdomen felt hotter than lava. I severe shortness of breath. Staggering through McDonalds parking lot, still holding the bag of food, I slowly sat down on the cement.

I heard the sound of an ambulance siren coming closer. I was surround by a crowd wanting to know what happened. The pain was so severe I couldn’t talk. Some in the immediate surrounding area saw and knew what went down. They heard five gunshots and knew who got shot.

I was barely breathing and having flashbacks of different events in my life. I thought I was dying, that I was going to take my last breath soon. The ambulance was getting close, but I thought, “Oh, what’s the use. I’m going to die right here in the parking lot. Oh, shit. Oh shit. I’m barely alive.”

“I’m here, buddy,” a friend named Manny from junior high school said to me as he reached for my hand to comfort me. I was convinced I was on my way to the pearly gates.

“Tell...my...brother...” I managed to mutter in

between tiny bits of oxygen intake, “I love him.” Manny hung on to my every word. “Tell...him...what happened,” As I uttered that last word, the ambulance pulled up next to me. I don’t remember much after that.

2 YOUNG SISTERS SHOT AT QUEENS RESTAURANT

By Rocco Parascandola - May 2, 1999, 4:00 a.m.

Three people – including two innocent sisters – were shot and wounded yesterday afternoon when one man opened fire on another outside a Far Rockaway McDonald’s, police said.

The two sisters – an 11-year-old shot in both legs and a 14-year-old shot in the left leg – were rushed to Peninsula General Hospital and were in stable condition.

A third person, Todd Taylor, 18, was shot in the stomach and rushed to Jamaica Hospital in serious condition following the 2:30 p.m. shooting.

Police said they believe Taylor, who lives nearby, was the intended target, but they did not know what the fight – which started outside the restaurant – was about.

Police said the shooter fired up to seven shots, possibly from a .45 caliber weapon.

A worker in a nearby discount store said she heard four shots and saw a black four-door sedan speed off down Beach Channel Drive.

Police and neighbors said the area has been a hot spot for late-night trouble in recent months. There was a nonfatal shooting within the past month.

Chapter 17 : ARRESTED DEVELOPMENT

May 1, 1999



I was told I arrived at Jamaica Hospital in critical condition. I woke up feeling horrible. The pain coming from my upper extremities was horrific. I didn't know if it was the anesthesia wearing off or what.

I had surgical staples in my abdomen and could barely move. As the nurse gave me medication, two detectives with totally opposed height walked in the room. I got an overwhelming spine-chilling feeling.

"Todd Taylor, good to have you with us," said Detective Number One, who was white, stubbly, probably of Italian descent, with a short, stocky stature. He continued, "The medical team saved your life. You should be grateful." His voice was unpleasantly nasal sounding. His sinuses must have rotted.

"Todd, do you know who shot you?" Detective Number Two asked. He was black, with thick prescription glasses, exceptionally skinny which compensated for the lack of height of his stout, short partner.

"No, no, I don't have the slightest idea who would do this to me," I managed in a weak voice.

Detective Number Two questioned with a quite tone,

"You don't have the slightest idea who shot you? Coming out of McDonald's, you didn't see anyone, or wasn't approached by anyone?"

I was in pain and with intravenous painkillers I wasn't alert enough to handle the interrogation. Detective Number One with a harsh accusatory tone,

"YOU KNOW WHO SHOT YOU!" The detectives were playing good cop, bad cop, the old "Dagnet" episode.

Detective Number Two, far less threatening than his partner, "If we find out you're a suspect, you're going to jail for attempted murder for a long, long time."

I thought, "How can I go to jail for attempting murder on myself?" I didn't answer him. I closed my eyes and felt the pain subside from whatever drug the nurse had just put in my I.V.

Detective Number One, harsh and loud as they walked out the door, "OKAY, WISE ASS, YOU GOT A SURE THING COMING TO YOU!"

The following day, my family had just left the hospital less than two minutes earlier. I was in good spirits, more alert and still feeling highly sensitive from what happened, but thankful that I was alive. The two detectives walked in the room. They had company with them—two Far Rockaway 101 Precinct policemen in uniform.

"Todd Taylor," Detective Number One said confidently, as the nurse looked on alarmed, "you're under arrest for attempted murder." I struggled with pain as the

policemen began handcuffing my wrists to the bed.

Shocked and appalled, I began throwing up on my hospital gown. There was no way to get my family back quickly. "You can't do this! I want a lawyer!" I responded with the little breath I could muster.

"Too late, asshole!" Detective Number One replied in his surly tone.

"Stay with this criminal until the Corrections Department picks him up," Detective Number Two instructed the uniform cops.

I felt the room spin as the two detectives walked out, confirming aloud that they got their man. I couldn't believe this was happening to me. This whole thing was ludicrous! Even after surgery, I still had the bullet lodged in my abdomen and would have it for the rest of my life.

The surgeon left the bullet in and later told me removing it would have likely done more harm. Even now I can feel the bullet with my fingers by pressing it in the center of my abdomen. I spent one hour in the Corrections Department hospital. My family came to get me after my grandparents paid the bail. I went home without any nursing help and toughed out the healing time without painkillers. I can't describe fully how much pain I was in for days. It's amazing that infection did not take over my entire body.

This event was to be far from over.

Chapter 18 : THE CLEVER ESCAPE

Late Summer 1999



It was midafternoon. “YO, ANTHONY!” yelled Roo. He yelled again, “YO, ANTHONY, HURRY UP!” Anthony came to the window and answered,

“Whad’up, Roo?” Anthony was in the project trap house on the second floor and was getting to that paper.

“You doin’ something right now?” Roo asked in an apologetic tone. He knew Anthony was busy. “I mean, I know you’re doin’ something, obviously. Why don’t you get outta the crib and go with me to cash my check?”

Anthony thought if he were to go to 54th Street, maybe he would see the guy who shot me. If Anthony saw anybody from the other side on 54th Street, or anywhere else, *it was goin’ down*. Anything for revenge. Anthony said, “.... it, I’ll go with you.”

Anthony told Roo to get his .45 caliber from his crib. He threw him the key from the window. Indecisive if he should take the elevator to the seventh floor apartment, or get the exercise and walk up the staircase, Roo mumbled to himself, “What the hell, I’m not in a rush,” and began walking up the staircase. When he entered the apartment, he saw Anthony’s mother and one of her crack-head friends in the kitchen. Roo knew that Anthony’s mother was using drugs but didn’t think twice about it.

“What’s shakin’, Roo?” asked hazy-eyed Debra as she

and her equally hazy-eyed friend laughed facetiously.

“Hey, Miz Debra,” Roo replied. “I’m just gonna get somethin’ for Anthony from his room.”

“Be my guest,” said Debra, as her crack-head friend looked Roo up and down. Roo unlocked the bedroom door and walked to Anthony’s bed, lifted the mattress, and grabbed the pistol. Anthony was getting agitated. “What in the hell is takin’ him so long?” He headed for the seventh floor in the elevator. As he entered the apartment, his mother shouted, “Hey, my sonnnn!” Anthony shook his head in despair seeing the condition of his mother and her friend.

Roo came out of the bedroom and Anthony asked, “You got the ka-tone?”

“Yah, you know, your mom’s crazy and her friend is crazier,” Roo said as they walked down the staircase. Roo handed Anthony the key and pistol. He concealed the pistol between his belt buckle and boxers.

Anthony and Roo were long-time friends drawn closely together from playing various sports.

Roo looked up to Anthony as an older brother. They were the same age, but Anthony acted older and had women friends of all ages—25, 28, 31, 36—and he was only 20.

Approaching 54th Street, Anthony was surveying the stroll, as Roo walked aimlessly with no worries.

“My check is only \$175.00. Do you need anything?” Roo asked.

Anthony looked at him like he was stupid and said, “Nah, nigga, I’m good. You want me to walk with, and I’m walkin’ with ya. Anthony was in a good mood. You never saw him depressed, moody, or grouchy. However the wind blows, Anthony was always the same.

“CDS AND DVDS, CDS AND DVDS, ALSO MIXED TAPES!” shouted a street vender in front of Checks-Cash.

Roo picked up a DVD and said to Anthony, “I want to see this.” How much is it?” Roo asked the vender.

“Ten dollars,”

“Man, hurry up!” said Anthony, growing impatient while Roo paid the man.

Anthony was thinking about his brother and seething with anger. As they stepped inside Checks-Cash, Roo got on line while Anthony was making sure that nobody lined him up. Anthony turned around facing the street and spotted Ham-Hog from Duck. Riding a bike, Ham-Hog slammed on the breaks with force, threw the bike down, walked toward Anthony and purposely bumped into his shoulder with violent intentions.

The scene got tense. Anthony quickly reacted pointing his gun at Ham-Hog. Ham-Hog lunged, grabbed Anthony’s gun-holding hand. A struggle for the gun began. The gun pointed downward, the gun pointed toward the ceiling, the gun waved all over, while both had their hands on the hammer. BOOM! BOOM! Two shots went off with the bullets piercing the ceiling! People screamed, frantic.

“Ooh, watch out!” Screams and shouts. “Aaayyye,

Aaayyye!”

Suddenly Anthony was in control, he flipped Ham-Hog onto his back.

“Not in front of my moms,” Ham-Hog screamed several times. “No, no, no, no don’t shoot me, don’t shoot me!” Ham-Hog screamed.

“My baby!” cried a woman who was standing in the crowd. “EHHH! EEHHH! SOMEONE STOP HIM, STOP HIM! STOP HIM! HE’S GOING INSANE! HE’S GONNA SHOOT MY BABY!” a woman wailed. Roo was shaking, holding on to the wailing older woman.

“Bye, nigga,” Anthony said breathlessly.

Ham-Hog called to his moms, “NOLA, NOLA, NOLA, NOLA!” The shot was so loud the entire 54th Street seemed to shake.

Ham-Hog’s mother, Nola, was screaming at the top of her lungs, “MY BOY, MY BOY IS SHOT!”

Anthony left the scene, not fleeing, more like a slow jog, across 54th Street not knowing for sure what just happened. As he reached the middle of the street, a police car was coming at him. He pointed the .45 caliber sideways and squeezed the trigger but the pistol was jammed. “Sh..t!” Now he was scared. “Oh, shit!” Anthony mumbled. Anthony ran through the 411 building, threw the gun up the back staircase, and flew out the back door. The police were following, but they didn’t know he ran out the back door. They were stuck.

“Call back up, call back up! We got a shooting on 54th

Street! The suspect is African-American, six feet, wearing a red jacket. Copy,” said a cop calling on his two-way radio for back-up help.

Anthony sprinted to the 434 building and started running up the staircase to the fourth floor where his side girl lived. Pounding on her apartment door, no one answered. He skipped steps, running frantically up to the next floor. “No body’s home! There’s nowhere to go, nowhere to go!” he mumbled. “S-H..T!” Right now sh..t was his favorite word. Nobody was home on three different floors. “.... it!” Leaving the building he saw an officer at the bottom of the steps. “FREEZE!” the officer yelled, taking cover.

Anthony ran into the 56-10 building and up the staircase trying to figure out what to do. “I know where to go,” Anthony thought. He was trying to play it cool, but he heard the ghetto bird humming, knowing for a fact the police were going to search everywhere.

The S.W.A.T. team was on the scene with riot gear and barking police dogs. Anthony was on the fourth floor and a woman and her son, who was Anthony’s future 12-year-old brother-in-law, appeared.

Anthony ran toward them and they all rushed into her apartment. “Here, put this on,” she said. It was a dress, sunglasses, a wig, orthopedic women’s shoes and a shoulder-strapped purse. Anthony wasted no time getting on the clothes, the ugly shoes and then applied bright red lipstick.

The S.W.A.T. team and their dogs were now at all the

building's exits. Anthony and his future brother-in-law got on the elevator and, as soon as the doors opened on the main floor, the police dogs went insane. The S.W.A.T. officer tried to calm down the dogs while Anthony and the boy walked arm-in-arm to the back entrance and out of the building. They walked toward the 60s blocks as if nothing bothered them.

“Woo hoo, with your fine ass! Come here. Let me talk to you for a moment with your sexy self,” a stranger yelled loudly, as Anthony sashayed across the 60s block.

Chapter 19 : BITTER CONSEQUENCES

Summer 2000



“I know this nigga is selling over here,” I said to myself while looking across the street out of my uncle Sid’s trap house second-floor window. I wasn’t getting any of the profits, but this was HIS TERRITORY, HIS ESTABLISHMENT.” I wasn’t a worker in my uncle’s business because I was enrolled in college—Borough of Manhattan Community College—and was living with him and my aunt. My aunt was so proud of me. I was doing the right thing.

I graduated from high school just in time to enroll in college.

I dropped out of high school at 16 during the 10th grade to run the streets with my grimmys. It took over three years of my life. But, you know, it was the life I chose. At that time I didn’t think about life. I was just living, you know, with no goals. I did accomplish getting my G.E.D. at the age of nineteen. I didn’t have a prom to go to, or a party.

I failed the high school equivalency test six-months earlier and took the test again and passed it. I received a Department of Education letter, opened the envelope and

found my diploma! I passed! I didn't think of it as a big deal. I thought, "I am supposed to have this."

After the incident with the three guys from the other side, the experience made me ready to stop selling drugs, get out of the life, and go to college. I liked learning and was studying computer science. My aunt and uncle lived in Nassau County, located next to Far Rockaway, but part of Long Island, and I liked living with them. My uncle was in the life, selling drugs from his nearby trap house and I felt it my duty to help him protect his turf.

I knew this other side ninja was selling across the street in front of my uncle's trap house! "I couldn't let it go down like this! I couldn't!' disrespectful-ass ninja!" I thought to myself. I grabbed the .357. It was about to go down for real. I turned to my girlfriend Stacy and told her I had to go out and that I'd be back soon. Heading downstairs, not rushing, I wanted to peep the scenery just in case if I started clappin' up the ninja's head. Plus, it was Friday night, a big night at Mr. B's Lounge.

It was after midnight and Mr. B's Lounge was poppin' with lots of people drinking and dancing to loud music. Suddenly shots were fired somewhere far away. Nobody's gonna hear much since the trap house and the lounge were located in the middle of the desolate part of Far Rockaway. "I'm gonna handle his ass!" I said softly, feeling enraged. He was on the other side of Lawrence Avenue across from the trap house. As I approached him, he was walking slowly toward me.

"This nigga got the audacity to bubble right across the street," I said aloud.

“Yo! Hot boy, come here for a second,” I said non-threateningly. I slowly approaching him. All along the tre pound was concealed. It was around 1:00 a.m. and dark with no streetlights. “Yo! Wha’cha doing here?”

The man looked behind himself, as if I was talking to someone else.

“Why you talkin’ to me?”

“What the!” I thought. I pulled the pound from behind my back, but the hot boy didn’t see it. “Nobody hustle on this avenue! NOBODY!” I said.

It took a minute before he saw what I was packing, but he was not about to back down.

“I can bubble what I want, wherever I want. ... you!” he answered belligerently.

As soon as the words left his mouth, I smacked any more words out of it. WHAM, WHAM, WHAM, WHAM! I was violently hammering him over the head with the .375 acting like a mad man. I went crazy, insane, mad at the world.

“You’ disrespect me! YOU-wham-DIS-wham-RESPECTED-wham-ME-wham. Where I come from, YOU GET DEALT WITH! Not later, but NOW, ON SIGHT!” I wasn’t tolerating anything. I’m going to get respect by any means.

D.J. Flash came out of Mr. B’s Lounge on his break from spinning records. He always was smiling. I don’t know what he had to smile about, but it must have been something good. No one heard the muffled sounds due to

the loud music inside, but Flash could when he came outside. “Well, damn,” Flash called out to me,

“You gonna kill that boy, Todd! STOP IT. STOP!”

As quickly as rage come over me, D.J. Flash snapped me out of it and I let the kid go. The ninja’s face was swelling as he ran away. I needed to get inside and cool off. I hurried upstairs before the police rode the block. Someone was always snicking on Lawrence Avenue. I was disrespected, my uncle was disrespected, and the arrogant hot boy didn’t know who he was foolin’ with. He wasn’t gonna move, so I made him!

After I manhandled the kid for disrespecting my presence and selling drugs in my uncle’s trap house territory, I went upstairs to stash the the pound. I looked out the window. Just like I thought, the Nassau police were rolling. Stacy was on the second floor of the trap house with me. She knew I was upset before I went outside. Back inside the trap house my mood had greatly improved. She looked at me and noticed that I was glancing out the window. “What did you do?” she asked, worried.

I looked at her as if everything was fine, “Oh, nothing. Everything is alright, Stacy. You want some China-man—rib tips and pork fried rice?” I asked in my best Asian accent.

“Yeah, silly,” she answered with a giggle.

“Okay. Howee-chi-guy nu!” I yelled, knowing it lifted the atmosphere. There was a Chinese restaurant not far from the trap house open 24 hours.

It was a two-day event. It all started with the pistol-whipping incident. I didn't want it to come out that way. I was supposed to lay low and go to work at Toys "R" Us while I went to college during the day. I was working the night position stocking shelves in Long Island City. I had a day off from school and the night off from my night job, which led to the second-day incident.

The next afternoon I was walking my pitbull dog, Bonkers. It was around 2:30 p.m. I was fully aware of my actions after what happened the night before when I pistol-whipped a nobody-ass from the other side for not respecting another man's turf. I knew he wasn't another-side boss.

As I walked Bonkers, I noticed two cars had pulled up by the Klean Laundromat not far from where I was walking. The men got out of the cars and looked directly at me, then went into the Laundromat. Expecting trouble, I ran back to the trap house and grabbed the Borner and tucked it in my waistband. The other side Packard brothers, Mike and Ethan, big drug dealers, not muscular, but twice my size, came out of the Laundromat. I knew the dude I manhandled yesterday worked for them. I resumed walking Bonkers.

"Hey, get 'em, boy. Get 'em, boy," I said egging on Bonkers who started to growl. We were ready for whatever was to come. I took a glimpse and the Packard brothers were walking straight toward me. I stopped walking and stood firm.

Mike "Why you do my man like that?" as they continued to approach me. I was determined to send them

back to Duck with holes in their asses.

“He violated, so he got dealt with,” I answered with confidence while clutching the hidden fever.

“So, do me like that,” Mike replied with scorn. Ethan sauntered toward me. Bonkers, menacing with his growls, stopped him in his tracks.

“No one gonna mess with Bonkers!” I said and continued, “Broad daylight, get right!”

As Mike walked past the barbershop coming closer to me, my cousin Flynn and Stacy came running outside from my uncle’s trap house.

“What in the hell! Yo, chill, yo chill!” Flynn yelled sternly. Flynn jumped in front of Mike.

I repeated to myself, “Todd, it isn’t worth it. It isn’t worth it.” I had no choice. If I laid these niggas flat, I’d face more criminal charges. I was out on bail for attempted murder. There are also criminal charges against me in Queens, and now, if things get violent, possibly Nassau County. The legal system was gonna put me into prison if I shot these cowards.

“Yo, chill, man! Chill! You ain’t gonna come at my cousin, man,” Flynn warned the brothers, while

Mike fondled his waistline, as if he had a hidden skat on him. I stood rigid, thinking one of the dummies would pull a heater on me. Flynn stood six-foot wide and tall and made it clear they weren’t supposed to lay a finger on his little cousin. Ethan and Mike halted and their stance appeared no longer confrontational. Flynn eased up. I

relaxed. I glanced at Mike thinking, “Fool, you are gonna get what’s comin’ if you make one stupid move.”

The Parker brothers turned around and walked away, toward the Klean Laundromat. I drove to my hood in Queens, all along pondering what had happened.

Now in college and working nights, I had left the street life behind, but still torn. I wasn’t about to bow down like some lame-ass chump. I kept on standby my hitta, humongous. Just in case.

“Wha’s up, T, wha’s shakin’?” Humongous asked.

“Gotta small problem,” I said.

Humongous looked at me with solicitude that any brother would say he had a problem.

“That’s what I like, bro, problems. You need me for that problem? I can cause a serious problem,” Humongous said.

“Nah, There’s no need for that. You don’t have to gather the homies. I’ll solve it,” I said.

“You need something, if I got it, you got it,” Humongous.

When I got back to the strip a few hours later, I went upstairs in my uncle’s trap house and Uncle Sid, Flynn, and Jamie were there.

“I know what happened. You know you can’t take that back,” Uncle Sid said.

“That dude violated your territory, Uncle Sid, plus he disrespected me.” I said. “So, whatever it is, I’m not going

out like a lame homie.”

Uncle Sid took a deep breath, “Let’s do it!”

Uncle Sid, Jamie, Flynn and I walked to the Laundromat to settle the dispute with the Packard brothers. Once inside the Laundromat, Uncle Sid asked Ethan,

“What’s the deal?”

“Man violated my worker,” Ethan said.

“That my nephew. He was lookin’ out for my best interest,” Uncle Sid corrected him.

“That your nephew, word?” Mike asked. “What the fuck you doin’ over here, Jamie?”

“Huh, huh, these my peoples,” Jamie answered.

“Oh, ya, what you wanna do, Hult? Act right,” Mike said as he rushed Jamie.

Jamie was a golden gloves competitor back in his day. The punch came at him in as if slow motion. Jamie dipped the blow and came up with a two-piece. “POW-POW!” The two blows staggered Mike as he reached for his pistol. I saw Mike reaching for his alternative. I was not going to let it play out that way. I pulled the heater and started blazing. Lagga-lagga-lagga-lagga-lagga, the gun repeated! The entire block scattered. Ethan took flight as if he was doing a television commercial for track shoes.

Mike stumbled, then dashed around the corner trying to find a safe spot. Mike was out of breath. I spotted him and began creeping up on him. I wanted him BAD. I could taste his blood on my teeth. Still trying to catch his breath, I saw

him flinch, but it was just the sound of an empty tin can rolling in the wind. As he rotated back, the slug grazed his ass. He started jumping up and down with pain. I despised Mike. He probably didn't think I was about that life.

“You think it's a game? You thought I wasn't coming back for you?” I said. I raised the gun to his head.

“No, no, no, don't kill me, please. No,” he pleaded.

“You ain't even worth one more slug.” I heard sirens.... I sped off.
