AN INSPIRING TRUE LIFE STORY



SHOULDA BEEN DEAD

DAMIEN JACKSON AS TOLD TO **DAVE JACKSON**

Shoulda Been Dead

By Damien Jackson
As told to Dave Jackson

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Many of the personal names in this book have been changed,
but the story is true.

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To every young person coming
from a broken home,
and to all those who helped me
through my lowest moments.
You are remembered
and appreciated!

INTRODUCTION

AS FAR back as I can remember I always lived in a broken home.

My parents should've never been together in the first place and I felt like I would never live to see eighteen. Like I was cursed. It made me hate the world. It made me hate myself. It made me bitter. I was like a time bomb waiting to explode.

My dad was never around; my mom was on her own thing. She said things no mother should ever say to her children. Things that can't be erased. The kind of things that leave scars for years to come.

Sometimes I got so mad that I could taste blood in my mouth. But other times I felt so depressed that I just wanted to die. Even before the age of ten, I fantasized about killing myself nearly every day. I always had a bit of a temper problem too. I got kicked out of so many pre-schools that they started calling me a pre-school dropout.

I became what I swore I never would. A violent, aggressive, cold-hearted, criminal-minded, statistic. I was no Scarface, I was a corner hustler. I worked blocks; I was selling one rock at a time. I had to fight my own wars.

And oh, how I felt the world owed me. I never asked to come here. I didn't ask for the parents I got. I didn't ask for a dad who beat me, but never spent time with me. I didn't ask for a mom who was too busy in the clubs. I also didn't ask for those I should and did look up to, to teach me how to hustle.

But thankfully, I learned that even the worst possible hand you can be dealt could win the game, if you make the right choices. It all came down to choices in the end. And one choice changed everything.

God help me, I’m fallin’,
Helpless, I’m callin’,
Restless! Hell of a hand,
But I was dealt it.
Now what’s a brotha to do?

CHAPTER ONE

I FLIPPED the butt of the smoked-out blunt toward the storm drain. “Hey, Chachi, you believe in God?”

He looked my way with a smirk. “Only god I know is ‘Mr. God Damn,’ but why would I ever believe in him? What’s he ever done for me?”

“That ain’t right, man,” my brother Derrick chimed in. All three of us were sitting on a bench in front of Tempta- tions pool hall and strip club, which along with the Circle-K convenience store and gas station anchored the little strip mall where we ran our business. “You shouldn’t talk like that,” Derrick added. “That’s like blasphemin’. Something bad’ll happen to you.”

Chachi stood up and stepped out into the parking lot, raised his hands, looked up, and spun slowly around as if he were a radar screen. “Well, if he don’t like it, he can strike me right here, right now. Bring it on!”

I shook my head. “You just stay away from me, man. I don’t want none of that. How come you don’t believe in God?”

He came back to the bench … guess I wasn’t too worried about him being close. “Look,” said Chachi, “any God who would let my best friend get murdered when we were only nine years old ain’t one I’d even want to believe in, even if he did exist.”

There wasn’t anything either Derrick or I could say to that, so we all sat there in silence, passing the forty-ounce bottle of malt liquor back and forth, thinking about who was going to have to go back into the Circle-K and steal another when that one was gone. It was a slow day for drug dealers, and I was feeling depressed. Guess that’s why I’d started thinking about God. Maybe everything was going wrong because we’d been doing so many wrong things and he was punishing us.

I leaned forward, elbows on my knees, chin in my hands. “You guys realize we’re everything they taught us in school not to be?”

“Whaddaya mean?”

“You know, those classes where they tell you not to steal or lie or sell drugs or rob people? Well, we’re all that and more. Know what I’m sayin’?”

Chachi slapped me on the back. “Yeah, so we bad! So what? Everybody does that stuff these days. It’s the only way to get ahead. You know if we like let up for even a hot minute, there’ll be Crips and GDs and Vice Lords and the Mexicans and the Cambodians all up in here tryin’ to take over our block.”

“Yeah,” said Derrick, “like most of them already think they runnin’ this trap.”

“I know, and that’s the problem,” I said. “There ain’t no getting’ ahead. This was our real estate, but now all Atlanta wants in on it.” I was talking about the thirty or more other

dealers who worked our trap night and day, week in and week out. Everyone was doing the extortion thing, robbing one another, beating up the crackheads and addicts who came there to get their dope. One guy got shot in the head, blew his brains all over the garbage he was sitting beside. He stayed there all night, moaning and sobbing, calling for help until morning when he finally died. None of us helped him or even moved his body. Guess the Circle-K people finally found him and called the police. After that the cops cranked up the pressure, raids several times a week. It was crazy, crazy, crazy, like an insane scene out of a movie.

There was no peace!

I might have put up with all that — considered it came with the territory — but what really twisted my ulcer, was how cold and heartless I'd become. I still ran into Celia from time to time. We'd been schoolmates a while back, and I always liked her. Just that morning I'd seen her again, this time at Target when I'd dropped by for a pair of socks. Target always had a sale on 'em. You know, all you could fit in our pocket for "lifty cents"? Anyway, Celia was working the checkout and called to me as I was heading toward the door. I went over, hoping she hadn't caught me. But she hadn't. "Hold on, Damien," she said. "I'm going on break as soon as I finish with this customer."

We went outside where she could grab a smoke. I could see something was troubling her. "So, wassup? How you doin'?"

Her gaze at me turned into a squint as she took a deep drag and a tendril of smoke snaked up to burn her eyes. Or

was that a tear? “It’s my dad,” she murmured, turning away to exhaled.

“So … how’s he doin’?” Though I already knew how he was doing, and I knew she probably knew I knew, so I also looked away, staring hard across the parking lot like I’d seen someone I knew walking by on the street.

Celia didn’t make a scene, but her voice was heavy with disappointment. “He’s destroying our family with the crack. It’s gonna kill him, too, if he doesn’t quit. Know what I’m sayin’?”

“Oh yeah, that’s bad stuff, bad stuff.” I knew exactly how bad it was for her dad, too, because I was his supplier. I’d seen him go from a strong, confident man with a good job when Celia and I had been schoolmates to an out-of-work junkie who’d lost his health and all his dignity. Just the week before he’d come to me begging me to extend him a little more credit because he didn’t have any money. He was desperate, but I turned him down, so he went to one of the other dealers. When he couldn’t pay, that dealer beat him up and left him facedown in the middle of the parking lot. When I left the trap at 4:30 that morning, I walked right by his body and didn’t even flinch.

It was gone the next day, and the police weren’t crawling all over the place, so I figured he must have made it on his own and forgot all about him … until I saw Celia.

“If you get a chance,” she sighed, “would you say something to him, Damien? Encourage him, maybe? You know he used to like you.”

“Oh, sure. I’ll do what I can.”

Now, I sat on the bench outside Temptations with my two homies feeling as low as something I’d scrape off the bottom of my shoes. I couldn’t even tell the other guys about it because it wasn’t just the pressures of gangbanging and drug dealing that was getting to me. I could excuse all the robbing, stealing, cheating, fighting, even the people who had been killed. But how could I excuse myself? How had I become so cold and heartless?

Yeah, I did believe there was a God out there somewhere, and if he knew what I’d turned into, I wouldn’t blame him for getting back at me.

“Hey, Damien!” Derrick slugged me in the shoulder. “Wake up, man. You zoned out there. Hey, man, it’s your turn to go get us another forty-ounce. Okay?”

“Yeah, yeah. Whatever.” I got up and headed toward the convenience store, still thinking about Celia and her old man, the guy whose life I was ruining. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a green lowrider turn into the parking lot, throbbing with the beat of some Latin hip-hop. But I didn’t pay any attention as I entered Circle-K.

Tony, the manager, knew we stole from him all the time, but what could he do? We owned the block. Our beer and cigarettes were like the rent he paid us for letting him stay in business. Still, I never made it too obvious. A new woman was running the cash register, so I assumed Tony was in the little stock room in the back. I had just opened the door to the refrigerator and was reaching for the beer when one of

the wannabees who were always hanging round the strip mall came running into the store and right up to me.

The kid looked up with wide eyes. “Hey man, you can’t go back out there. Those Brown Side Locos are lookin’ for you. They say they’re gonna shoot you, and they look serious, man.”

Instinctively I reached behind my back to where the big “Dirty Harry” .357 was tucked in my belt under my XXXsized San Francisco 49ers jersey. Then I waved my hand. “So what?” I slipped the forty-ounce into the pocket of my cargo pants, and started toward the door.

The wannabee grabbed my arm. “You can’t go out there. Derrick said to disappear.”

“For real, man? Don’t be jackin’ me around, now. You gettin’ on my last nerve here kid!”

“No B-S, man. I seen their guns.”

I shook my head, and pushed the kid toward the door while I turned and went into the back stock room. Tony was there as I expected, moving some boxes around.

“What you want?”

“Gotta use your backdoor.” And I walked toward it.

“So you’re gonna steal my beer —” he pointed at my bulging pocket “— then you expect to use my backdoor

’cause you’re too lazy to walk around the outside. No way, man. Give me that beer or pay for it up front.”

So today Tony was feeling brave and thought he could stand up to us, was he? I shook my head. “Look, man. Just let me cut through this one time.”

“Why should I?”

“’Cause some BSLs are out there saying they want to blow my head off. I don’t have time for this today, and you probably don’t want bullet holes through your front windows. Okay? So let me go through.”

I pushed past him and went out the door, across the little driveway where delivery trucks dropped off stuff for the store, and ducked through the hole in the fence that led into the woods.

Fifty yards into the woods I came to a large rock outcropping that overlooked a small clearing. I walked out onto the rock and sat down, letting my legs hang over the edge. I looked up and was surprised to see the sun shinning. Huh! I hadn’t even noticed what kind of a day it was. I was only sixteen, but both Derrick and I were already homeless, sleeping in vacant apartments, laundry rooms, or sometimes out in the open. So we always knew when the weather was bad, but seldom paid attention when it was good. It was just another symbol of how low I’d gotten.

I’d never wanted to be a gangbanger or a drug dealer. I never intended to be drinking and smoking weed all the time. But there I was, and even as I thought about it, I

opened the forty-ounce, chugged a few gulps, and lit up a blunt. The Dirty Harry was poking into my back, so I pulled it out and laid it on the rock beside me. It sure was shiny. I picked it up and hefted the weight of it.

I pointed it at a tree across the clearing, imagining wasting those BSLs back there who had it in for me and all my other enemies and the cops and my mother's boyfriend and my dad and everyone else who made my life miserable.

"Ha!" I shook my head. I used to be a mediator, the baby of the family who tried to help keep the peace between all my brothers and sisters. I'd been so smart in the first grade that they sent me to a special school, but now I was a dropout. What had happened to me?

My shoulders shook, and I started to cry. I drank some more and smoked some more while my spirits got lower and lower. "I can't do this no more," I muttered. I picked up the Dirty Harry again, and this time, instead of pointing it at the trees across the clearing, I spun the cylinder. I put the barrel up to my temple. That would be one way to get out of this mess. I put it down, drank a little more beer, and took a few more tokes off the blunt.

I didn't know any other way out.

I picked up the Dirty Harry again and cocked it. It seemed like the only way.

"Hey, Damien. That you out there? Wassup, man? You cool?"

I quickly put the gun down and wiped my eyes on my shirtsleeve before turning to see who was coming up the trail. Lamar … a younger guy who sang in a group from Chicago called Subway.

“Hey, how you doin’? How’d you find me out here, anyway? Not many people know ’bout this place.”

“Derrick figured you’d be out here. He told me to come tell you the coast was clear.”

“Oh yeah? Good. Okay, you go on back. I’ll be along directly.”

I stood up, reeling a little from so much alcohol and weed… or maybe it was the realization that I should’ve been dead if that kid hadn’t come along. He said Derrick sent him, but was it only Derrick who sent him right at that moment? Was someone looking out for me? It had me going.

I thank God for my mother
’Cause my father wasn’t home.
If I didn’t have my brothers,
Then I wouldn’t h’ve been strong.
And we done tried and we struggled,
’Cause we ain’t perfect at all.
But we survived, didn’t crumble,
’Cause we be trustin’ in God.

CHAPTER TWO

THINGS HADN'T always been that bad. I was born in 1982 in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, and those first years had seemed pretty good to me. I don't remember much about my dad, Greg Jackson. He didn't seem to be around very much. But my mom, Sadie, spoiled me 'cause I was the baby of the family, with a sister, Rose, two years older and brother, Derrick, three years older. Actually, my mother had four other children before she married my dad, but I don't remember much about them during those first years. They were living with our aunts.

We had lots of money back then, enough for a nice house, a maid, and all the toys I could ever want. I presumed the money came from my dad. He worked for the Department of Transportation, and occasionally we would drive out to a work site and see him there with the other men working on the roads. But I later learned that the real money came from my mother who worked for the Italian Mob.

Most of the time she was at home caring for me, taking me for walks in the nearby park, reading to me, and teaching me how to conduct myself with good manners—how to dress, speak politely, and eat properly. She was like my best friend. But every week or so she would take a trip to New York for a day or two and come back with some packages that she gave to these white guys who wore dark shades and stopped by our house in their long black cars.

When she had to take one of those trips, we usually drove her to the airport where she got on a commercial airliner. But one time we took her to a little airport where she got on a private jet. She was the only one who climbed up those steps, and it made me feel really weird.

Everything was tense in our family just before and after those trips, though I had no idea why. Only much later did I learn my mother was also deeply into voodoo and spiritualism, which I'm sure added to the cloud of darkness and fear that haunted us in spite of all the material comforts we enjoyed.

Sometimes things happened that I didn't understand. When I was four or five, Derrick, Rose, and I were sent to live with our Aunt Pearl in Ocala, Florida. That's the first time I remember meeting my older half-brothers and sister: Kevin, the oldest, my sister May, then Rickie and Vince. But I don't remember why I was there, or even for how long. But Aunt Pearl's house was weird, painted a dreary green inside, not a cheerful green, but something like vomit. And she had a scraggy old dog named BoBo—a boxer, I think, not sleek and muscular like most boxers but all blotchy, like he had some kind of a skin disease. The front of the house looked pretty nice, except for a couple beat-up cars always parked in the driveway. But around back it was a total junkyard— no grass, just trash, chickens, and junk. I hated being there even though my aunt was good to me.

Then one night my parents pulled up with a U-Haul and said, "Okay, we're picking up Damien." The strange thing was, that's just what they meant: They took only me! They

didn’t take any of the other kids back to Fort Lauderdale, just me. Of course, I was happy to be back with my mom, but I had no idea why they didn’t take my brothers and sisters. It was like she always wanted me right next to her, spoiling me so much I became a bit of a brat. And I used to play it for all it was worth. Whenever my brothers or sisters picked on me, I’d cry, “Leave me alone. I’m just a little baby,” not realizing that by then I should have been embarrassed by such a claim.

“You just wait,” they’d say. “Someday she’ll leave you alone, and then we’re gonna get you good!”

At the time, I thought they were just being mean, not realizing how deeply they all resented me for being Mom’s favorite and especially for having been left behind with my aunt.

The only time I remember my mom getting mad at me was a rainy day when we trucked into Eckerd’s drugstore. I was wearing a yellow raincoat and rain hat. When we got up to the counter, I began begging for some Bubblicious bubblegum. “No. Put it down. Put it back!” my mom snapped.

I eyed her while she tried to work out something with the clerk, and then I lifted my rain hat and put the gum on my head, replacing the hat to hold it in place. I thought I had gotten away with it. When we got home, I palmed it when I took off my rain gear, and in a few minutes had some of it in my mouth, chewing with glee as I sat on a kitchen chair.

Suddenly, my mom sniffed. “What’s that I smell?” She came close and saw me chewing. “Is that the gum I told you to put down?” Her face looked as dark and angry as the weather outside.

“Yeah …”

“How’d you get that? You stole it, didn’t you?” She pulled my jaw down. “Did you steal that? You better answer me, boy!”

“Yes, mommy,” I whimpered.

And boy, did she lay one on me big time that day. I couldn’t sit down all evening. She made me take the gum back to the store, too … the pieces I hadn’t chewed already, that is.

* * * *

Sometimes Mom took me with her when she went to the night clubs where she talked to the people she worked for. She wasn’t clubbing, but she always looked elegant. She’d spend hundreds of dollars getting her hair braided, but not just normal braids. They were really thin, tucked into swirls, and she had the best clothes. Sometimes she wore dresses that looked Caribbean. When it was night or the weather was cooler, she’d wear really fancy fur coats and carry a designer bag. And her jewelry was the real thing—diamonds and gold, never anything fake.

Sometimes she’d spend a couple hours “talking business” with these guys while I just sat there drinking a Coke.

At the same time she was being high-class and working with these high-rolling mafia, we lived not too far from Holiday Park in Fort Lauderdale. One day when we were walking in the park, we met a guy who said he was hungry. Mom said, “Okay, I’ll go home and fix you something.” She made him a sandwich, and we brought it back and gave it to him. He was really appreciative, and word must’ve gotten around. There were a lot of homeless in that park, and the next day a couple more people asked for some food, so she made them sandwiches, too. But when we brought them back to the park, Mom said, “Tomorrow I’m bringing a big pot of chili, so you tell everyone, okay?”

That started a routine, and pretty soon she was feeding forty or fifty people! I’m talking about really rough guys, guys the police would be watching. Once a cop came up to her and said, “You can’t be feedin’ them out here like this.”

“Why not? You want a bowl of chili?”

“No, no thank you, Ma’am. But we can’t protect you out here like this.”

“Protect me from what?”

“From … from all these homeless men. These are dangerous people, you know.”

My mom just turned her head to the side. “Well, I know dangerous, but these people are just hungry, and I’m givin’ them something to eat. There’s no law against that, is there?”

The cop just shook his head and walked away.

Before long my mom got other people involved. She went to Publix, the nearby grocery store, and asked for contributions. My mom had a way about her, and pretty soon the manager agreed that at the end of every day, she and the people who had begun helping her could pick up anything they couldn't sell that was out of date and use it to feed the hungry.

Some people told her she shouldn't be taking me to the park with that riffraff. But those guys loved me. They treated me so good, saying, "Come on over here. You want to sit down and talk to me?" And I would, even though some of them smelled pretty rank. Once on my birthday one of the guys, Mr. Roy, said he had something special for me. "But it's a surprise. You have to close your eyes." So I did. When I opened them, he handed me a slingshot he'd made out of rubber bands and a Y-shaped stick. I really loved that slingshot because I knew it wasn't store-bought.

I found out later that Mr. Roy wasn't homeless because of financial problems. He was a successful doctor, but when his wife cheated on him and left him, he had a real breakdown and decided to leave everything. He was living on the streets because he simply didn't want to deal with life anymore.

When Super Bowl Sunday rolled around, my mother got tables and set up a whole row of them for a banquet. She got neighbors to help cook and strung an extension cord across the street to power a TV so all the guys could watch the game.

That was a great day. Everyone was happy … so different than the day when she announced to these new friends we were moving. They were stunned. They didn't know what to say. Who else would help them and show them respect like she had?

That's the mother I knew back then, and because of that, when things later changed, I could never hate her. I knew deep down she was a beautiful person.

* * * *

When I was just starting preschool, my parents collected my brothers and sisters and reunited our family in a large house in Miami—ranch style, yellow with dark brown trim, four or five bedrooms, and a humongous living room. A creek ran through the large backyard, and we had room for lots of pets—an iguana and guinea pigs and a dog named Rainy, who looked just like Benji the movie star dog, but chewed up everything like a maniac. And I had a yellow parakeet I called Sunshine. He chattered and sang to me every time I came in the house. But one day when I got home from kindergarten, I found my bird tied to the ceiling fan, spinning round and round, quite dead, while several of my brothers and sisters stood at attention, saluting and singing, "You are my Sunshine, my only Sunshine."

I wailed, of course, and couldn't stop. How could they be so mean to me? But it was probably their smoldering resentment for being left behind with our aunt when my folks took me as their favorite.

We had a maid when we lived in that house because my dad was seldom home, and my mom often went on those “business trips.” But we treated her like dirt, playing tricks on her, calling her names, and even doing things to get her in trouble. One day my mom told us to tell her not to serve dinner until she got home, and we did, but then we snuck into the kitchen and ate up all the food while she was cleaning elsewhere in the house. She was actually a great cook, but we literally ran her out of the house treating her so badly.

Even though we were back together as a family, my mom still spoiled me. Some days she’d make a phone call and in a little while there would be a knock at the door, and when I opened it, a long black limousine waited outside. The driver would say, “Hi Damien. You want to go for a ride?” And he’d take me down to Ocean Drive in Miami and buy me whatever I wanted. But that wasn’t the only person who took me for drives. Sometimes a pimp named Tommy Cash would come by in his white Excalibur with gold trim and take me for rides, too. That car was gorgeous! I later figured out that Cash was actually my mom’s bodyguard. He was highly ranked in martial arts, and sometimes he picked her up from the airport and brought her home.

Things were getting tense. One day my brother Derrick and I were driving somewhere with just our mother when we stopped at a traffic light and noticed a black pouch in the middle of the road. She made Derrick jump out and get it. When he got back in the car, she grabbed it like she knew what it was. Inside there was a .38-calibur revolver and a

big wad of money. She stuffed it under the seat and sped off.

She came home one night with her face all beat up and her jaw broken. She was crying, and we were all terrified. She said she came out of one of the clubs where she worked and someone jumped her, smashing her face down onto the hood of a car. I don’t know if she knew who it was or not, but she wouldn’t talk about it. Maybe it was the people she worked for; maybe it was some rivals of her boss. Or maybe it was just someone who wanted to rob her, but we knew she was scared.

Not long after that, our folks announced we were moving to Atlanta. Just like that, no explanation, no long-term plans, no trip to find a new home. Just, “We’re moving, right away.”

Moving? Like we’d already moved several times, so what was the big deal? “Does it snow in Atlanta?” I asked.

Dad shrugged. “Yeah, once in a while, I guess.”

That was good enough for me. I didn’t even ask anymore questions.

Even though we had all kinds of nice furniture and toys galore, all we could take with us was what fit into the U-Haul trailer we hitched to the back of our car.

I didn’t know it then, but it was the end of the good life as far as I was concerned.

On rainy days I sit at home
And reminisce while I’m alone.
Oh Florida, Florida I miss my home,
The Georgia border did me wrong.
The first two years was two too long.
The years to follow brought the sorrows,
Kids that had to beg or borrow.
Debts done swallowed
All the cheese we need tomorrow.

CHAPTER THREE

WE WERE headed along the highway toward Atlanta at a high speed when the front of the car seemed to drop into a chuckhole to China, followed by a loud screeching and grinding. Mom screamed as Dad wrestled the steering wheel right and left to through the windshield.

“Where are we?”

“In the ditch,” my dad said. “Everyone okay?”

My brothers and sisters were cursing and asking what happened. Mom began to cry huge sobs, and pretty soon Derrick, Rose, and I were accompanying her like beginning Suzuki violinists.

A man poundiain control of our careening station wagon. I thought we must have hit something and looked back to see what it was, only to see our U-Haul trailer fishtailing back and forth, once going up on one wheel as though it was a wild horse twisting and bucking to get free of a rope. Before it righted itself, I was thrown into the back of the driver’s seat so hard I slid down to the floor as my Big Gulp dumped icy soda all over me. Suddenly we stopped, and everything was silent. I rose up to peer over the back of the seat only to see grass on the window finally stopped our wailing. “Anybody hurt in there?”

Dad opened his door with a loud creak of scraping metal—the fender had been pushed back into the door, and it never

opened right after that. “Yeah, we all okay,” he said, climbing out. “They just scared in there.” He straightened up and looked around. “What in the heck did we hit anyway? I didn’t see anything in the road.”

“Me neither. All I know is your wheel went bouncing down the road beside you while you were switching back and forth like a slalom skier. Didn’t you see it? The pickup ahead of me almost hit it. It was still rollin’ on down the road when you headed off into this ditch.”

My dad bent down and looked at the left front wheel well. “I guess you’re right.

That wheel sheared clean off. Never seen anything like it.”

The ditch we’d nosed into was steep. It’s a wonder no one was hurt from that final jolt of hitting the bottom.

My folks were too shook to pay much attention to Derrick and me when we climbed out of the car, because within a few minutes we were exploring on down the ditch until we found our front wheel where it had come to rest against a big sign announcing, “Welcome! We’re glad Georgia’s on your mind.”

Yeah, right. What a welcome!

* * * *

Once we got to Atlanta, we drove straight to the Biscayne Apartments off Old National Highway in College Park, just southwest of the airport. Our apartment was near the back of the complex, a big come-down from what we had in

Miami. The apartments were more like adjoining townhouses with brick fronts. Everyone had a private front and rear entrance. It didn't look too bad from the outside. But inside it was the pits. A grimy brown carpet that smelled like a wet dog was everywhere except the bathroom and kitchen.

The apartment was too cramped for a family with six kids. (For some reason Jason and May were still back in Ocala, Florida.) All five of us boys shared one bedroom. Pretty soon we were all wearing each other's underwear and socks because we had no dressers to keep them separate. The only furniture we had was what fit into that U-Haul, though it was pretty good … what there was of it. My folks had a king-sized waterbed with a heavy oak frame, a matching chest of drawers, and a big chair. We had some nice china and other things, of course. But little by little what was new became old and chipped and broken.

For the first time I began to appreciate the maids we'd had in Florida. At least they could cook and clean, but in Atlanta, we didn't eat all that well.

Kids swarmed all over the Biscayne Apartments, and we often ended up playing football on the ground between the rows of apartments until we beat down the grass into a field of red clay.

Our apartment was near the end of the back row, and Derrick and I were quick to start exploring. We found a little path through the trees that led to the school where I started first grade. There was a fence, of course, but somehow a hole "magically" appeared, which meant we could get to

school in a couple minutes instead of going all the way out to Old National Highway and around. Still, we were late nearly every day.

Soon, most of the kids from the apartment complex were taking that path, and that led to fights when some of the bigger kids bullied the younger ones and the guys picked on the girls, pinching their butts and chasing them.

After the first couple of months in school, everything was so easy for me that I got bored, which led to getting into trouble. Finally, the principal called my parents into the office and said I was so “gifted” they wanted to put me into an experimental program with eight other kids from the school. However, it meant getting bussed to another school where we were added to a class studying an advanced curriculum. This meant I had to get to school earlier to catch the bus and didn’t get home until later. That saved me from some of the fights when everyone else was walking through the woods, but it created tension between my brother Derrick and me. Whether it was the result of overcrowding in that small apartment or me acting too big for my britches, thinking myself so much smarter than anyone else, we began getting into some nasty fights. I mean, really wailing on each other.

There was a lot of tension in the whole family, too. I remember getting whipped by my dad several times with a belt. It seemed like never a day went by without something happening to cause a ruckus within the family.

Having a slightly different school schedule may have saved me from some of the hassles going to and from school, but

there was still the neighborhood, and it was rough. One day I was playing with another kid on a little hill when he said something that made me mad, and I started yelling at him. Pretty soon a whole crowd of other kids gathered around us yelling, “Fight, fight, fight!” So I hit him, and he punched me back. Pretty soon we were really going at it. When I realized I was getting the best of him, I started hitting him even harder until I really beat him up, even though he was bigger than I was.

But my victory just brought me more problems, because a couple days later another kid wanted to fight me, I don’t even remember the reason. But this time some of my brothers showed up, egging me on: “Get him, Damien! Get him good!” So we started fighting, but this time I was the one who got beat up, punched in the face really hard until I went down.

“Forget it! Forget it, man.” I scrambled to my feet and started walking away.

But my brothers ran up behind me, “What do you think you’re doing? You can’t let him get the best of you? Get back there and beat the heck out of him.”

I shook my head, keeping my face down so they couldn’t see the tears. “No way. He beat me. No way, man.”

“No, man. He didn’t beat you. He just got in a few good licks. But if you don’t go back there and win, we’re gonna show you what a real beating is.”

Reluctantly I turned around, but my heart was pounding and I was breathing deep, catching gasps to cover up how I was crying inside. What if he beat me up again? What if he beats me up, then what's gonna happen? Suddenly, I charged into him like a football tackle, and bam, bam! I just punched the kid in the face and started hitting him, hitting him, hitting him, while my brothers yelled, "Yeah! Yeah! That's it! That's the way. Don't ever let nobody beat you."

Finally, they pulled me off the other kid and we swaggered home as they slapped me on the back and congratulated me. But that fight changed me. I determined never to let anyone beat me ever again.

* * * *

One day when I was coming home from school, my brother Derrick was still in the woods horsing around with some other guys when I came through the hole in the fence. Suddenly, we heard a siren start to wail. It sounded close by in the apartment complex. We ran down the path out of the woods and raced around the corner of the building just as an ambulance pulled away from the front of our apartment.

We tried to chase it down, but it headed out of Biscayne, so we turned back. "What happened? What happened?" we asked bystanders.

"Your mother got electrocuted!"

"Yeah, she grabbed a frying pan on the stove, and it knocked her flat on the floor. Someone heard her scream, or she'd still be lying on up in there."

Electrocuted? Like killing someone in the electric chair? I'd heard of that. Georgia was still using "Old Sparky" whenever it had a criminal to execute. I began to cry. "Is she dead?"

"Oh, no, no, honey." A neighbor lady pulled me into an embarrassing embrace. "She was talking when they took her away. But she sure got a jolt. I 'spect she'll be home in a day or so. You can come on up in my place until your father gets home."

A couple girls we didn't like too much lived there, but we were so shook we went anyway. We just sat there watching TV and drinking sweet tea until our dad came for us. He took us home, then went to the hospital by himself. We kids fought over a stale bag of chips for dinner.

Mom came home the next day but didn't want to talk about what happened. All she'd say was that the blanketyblank stove tried to electrocute her when she picked up the frying pan.

The apartment maintenance people came that afternoon to fix it, but about a month later the same thing happened again—same time of day, just as we got home from school! But this time, we got home before the medics took her away. Mom was lying on the kitchen floor. The same frying pan lay beside her, the food she'd been cooking sloshed onto the floor. To me, she looked dead, and I felt like my whole world had come to an end. I was too scared to even scream.

The paramedics knelt down and checked her vitals. "Looks like she got electrocuted. See, that big burn on the side of

the pan. Keep those kids back. Could be a live wire around here somewhere."

I began to cry.

"Got a pulse," one of the medics said. "She's comin' 'round, I think."

At that point they chased us out of the house, and we joined the neighbors standing out front until they brought Mom out on the gurney. She looked terrible, but she raised her hand toward us like a wilted flower as they rolled her into the back of the ambulance.

Somehow she recovered and came home that night. The next day the maintenance people switched out that old stove and put in another one. We thought everything was good until Saturday morning. My dad came into our bedroom to get us boys up wearing his robe—he never wore shorts or just pants, always just that robe around the house. We heard Mom call from the kitchen downstairs, "You want me to make some brownies?"

"Yeah," we yelled back. I got dressed and started downstairs like the brownies would be ready in a minute. I could see into the kitchen from the stairs and saw Mom open the oven door and slide the pan in with the brownie mix in it. The moment she set it down on the rack, I saw a flash and heard a huge BOOM, and she flew back and fell out on the floor unconscious.

I raced down the last steps and into the kitchen screaming, "Mom, Mom, Mom! Help! Dad, help! Mom's been

electrocuted!”

Dad flew down the stairs, his robe billowing behind him like Superman’s cape, but there wasn’t anything he could do for her. We called 9-1-1, and in a few minutes the ambulance arrived again.

Not only were we frightened for Mom, but now we were really freaked out. This was the third time in a few weeks Mom had been electrocuted as if the house was haunted and out to destroy her. We had reason to be afraid, too, because when we lived in Florida, she’d more than dabbled in voodoo and spiritualism. We never really knew what it was, but it sure scared me.

I got even more scared a few days after Mom got home from the hospital. Again she was in the kitchen, this time making her favorite chamomile tea by heating water in the microwave. She had just pushed the start button when she heard a rumbling overhead and a section of the ceiling came crashing down on her head, knocking her to the floor in a pile of plaster and dust. I came running in from watching TV, and she did indeed look like some kind of voodoo queen, wide-eyed and all covered with white powder.

That was it! Whether it was spirits, lousy construction, or faulty wiring, we were scared out of there. Within a week, we moved.

We all got a cause.
We all get a callin’.
You big or you small,
You poor or you ballin’.
To rise or to fall,
We can’t afford to stall.
Must regain what we lost
No matter the cost.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE RUGBY Valley Apartments—our new “home”—lay northwest of the airport, not that far from the “haunted” Biscayne Apartments, but they had a swimming pool. I didn’t know how to swim, so at first I just clung to the edge in the shallow end. Uncle Kenny, my dad’s brother, also lived in the same apartment complex, and sometimes he and my dad would go swimming with us. It didn’t take long for my dad and uncle to teach me how to swim. Then I had a great time.

In Florida my dad had worked in road construction, but when we moved to Atlanta, he decided to become a salesman and started selling Saladmaster Cookware. That meant he was around sometimes during the day, and I began to feel like maybe he cared for me after all, teaching me to swim and all.

Then one day the cops wheeled up to our apartment, banged on the door, and arrested my dad—handcuffs and all—and took him away in a squad car. Turned out he had stolen the license plates off someone else’s car to put on his own. He stayed in jail a few weeks, and after that, whatever good had been going on between us was over. I was off getting into more fights and kissing the girls. Actually, just one girl. And she kissed all the boys. In fact, we used to line up—ten of us sometimes. Then she’d let us come up to her window one at a time and give her a kiss.

At Rugby Valley we started a fight club, too. Somewhere we got some boxing gloves, and we'd match up against each other and throw punches for hours until we were all worn out or someone got hurt. But I liked to fight. I was getting pretty good for a second grader, and I wanted to show it. Of course, with all my older brothers, nobody messed with me too much, but I wanted to earn the respect for myself. And fighting was a way to do it.

Most of what we did at that age was just boy stuff, running around in the woods, playing war games, climbing trees, looking for crawfish in the pond. But Derrick and I also had a sick fetish for mutilation. We caught bullfrogs and stuck firecrackers in them just to watch them explode. We also caught cats and tortured them, sometimes spraying them with lighter fluid and lighting it. It wasn't good. An evil darkness lurked behind it all, perhaps something spilling over from the spirits that had been haunting Mom. It may have been the beginning of the violence that nearly got us killed later.

There were human victims of my lust for violence, too. One was a big kid in the fifth grade who called me a name. We were standing on a little hill, and one of my friends was behind him. I nodded to my friend who knelt down on all fours behind the bigger kid, and I charged him. He fell backwards over my friend and rolled down the hill onto some broken glass. But I didn't care that he might be hurt. I charged down the hill after him and started kicking him, punching him, and beating him. Before I was done, he was hurt pretty bad.

* * * *

We didn’t stay long at Rugby Valley before we moved to Cedar Lakes Apartments. Mom and Dad tried to make it sound like an “upgrade,” as if we were moving up in the world, but we weren’t. I couldn’t continue in the “gifted” program at school anymore, so they enrolled me in regular classes, and I rode the same bus to and from school as my brother Derrick. That put us on equal footing and was good for our relationship, though we still fought all the time.

The bus dropped us off at the front of the apartment complex, and we had to walk through all the other buildings to get to our apartment. One afternoon, we hurried home, hungry as usual, and ran into the apartment yelling, “Mom, Mom, you here?” The apartment was laid out with stairs to the second floor right in front as we entered the door, a small living room on the right, and the kitchen on the left. Since she didn’t answer, we headed upstairs thinking she might be there.

When we couldn’t find her, we came back downstairs, went outside, and sat on the steps talking to some friends, thinking she wasn’t home. Feeling thirsty, Derrick went inside to get something to drink. A moment later he came back out empty-handed, a frozen look on his face.

“What’s the matter?” I laughed. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

“Mom’s dead!”

“What? Whatchu talkin’ about?” “I said Mom is dead!”

“Hey, man, don’t you be playin’ with me. That’s not funny.”

“She’s dead, man!” Derrick burst out crying. “Go see for yourself!”

I jumped up and ran in, and there she was, laid out on the kitchen floor again. But this time there was broken glass all around her and a puddle of dark, shiny blood spreading from her head.

For a moment, I couldn’t do anything but stare at her. I couldn’t even cry. You’d think one might get used to seeing trauma and be able to handle it. But no. Each time it happened, the fear grew greater, as if the world was spinning out of control. It was the greatest sense of fear I’d ever felt, like a sharp pain going down my spine. I was breathless, frozen, thinking, “Oh my God, oh my God! What do I do?”

I was watching her face so intently, that at first I didn’t realize her lips were moving ever so slightly. I leaned closer and realized she was trying to say, “Help. Help me,” so softly no sound came out.

I dashed outside, yelling, “Derrick she’s alive!”

Boom! We ran to the rental office, cause we didn’t have a phone of our own and burst through the door yelling, “Call 9-1-1! Call 9-1-1!”

“Calm down. Calm down, son. What’s the problem?” “No! I won’t calm down! Our mom, she’s dying! She’s bleeding to death on the floor!”

“What happened?”

“I don’t know. Just call 9-1-1! Can’t you understand?” When the ambulance people came, she was completely unresponsive.

“You sure she said something?” The paramedic sounded doubtful.

“Yes! Yes! She was trying to say something. Seemed like ‘Help’ to me.”

The man kept working on her, and pretty soon they took her off to the hospital.

We still didn’t know if she was dead or alive.

She came home the next day with a patch on her eye and a bandage on her head. We discovered that once again she’d been electrocuted, this time in a completely different apartment and with a completely different stove. How could anyone get electrocuted so many times? Who would believe it?

All she could say was that she had picked up a Pyrex bowl and reached to turn on the stove. That was the last she remembered. Apparently, when she fell, she hit her head and cut herself on the broken glass. After that, I lived in constant fear. I just knew that at any moment, Mom might be killed.

* * * *

We moved again, this time to Summer Brooke Apartments, where Mom had another baby, little Angel. For a while, the baby provided something of a distraction from all the ruckus in our family, but every time I heard an ambulance siren anywhere near where we lived, my heart started pounding, and I'd run to see if it was coming for Mom.

At Summer Booke we played a lot of football in the yards between the apartments. But I also ended up fighting almost every kid in Summer Brooke who was anywhere near my size. It always seemed like someone was in my face … or maybe I was in theirs.

Even though I was only eight years old, I started getting involved in music. We brothers formed this little group and sang what we called "old people's songs," stuff like the Temptations' "Just My Imagination." My older brother Rickie was in a dance group, and he tried to teach us a few steps to add to our music. Vince was starting to rap. We sang at picnics and parties, anywhere people would listen to us. I guess a lot of people thought we were really cute, especially Ashley.

Ashley was my first girlfriend. I think she was from Germany where her dad had been stationed in the Army. But she was the first girl I really kissed … except for that girl at Rugby Valley who kissed all the boys from her bedroom window.

* * * *

My father's work wasn't bringing in much money, and even when he did get a good commission from the sale of those

Saladmaster pots and pans, it somehow disappeared before he brought it home to pay for our household expenses. This was one of the reasons we couldn't afford to live anywhere other than those dumpy extended-stay motels, even though some of them called themselves "apartments." But every time we moved it was with high hopes that things would be different, that this would be heaven again. But for the next few weeks we'd end up eating nothing but ramen noodles—ten packs for a dollar—and we realized again, nothing had changed.

That Christmas drove home how far we'd fallen from the fat days in Miami. I woke up Christmas morning to discover that my only gift was a little spinning top. I'd been used to a whole full room of new toys, anything I said I wanted. But there I sat on the floor with that little plastic tornado-shaped toy and a string to spin it. What was that about? None of my brothers and sisters got anything better, either, nothing that couldn't have been bought in a dollar store.

I felt like garbage, like my mom and dad didn't care for us anymore. If they did, they'd certainly do more to provide for us.

Christmas afternoon I got into a terrible fight with Derrick when he tried to grab my top out of my hands. He busted my lip, and I was bleeding all over everything. Rather than stop me, that made me fight all the harder. I almost grabbed a heavy book and smashed him in the face with it. I really wanted to hurt him, but mostly I was taking out my anger … on him and anyone else who crossed my path.

* * * *

Our next stop was Stone Mountain. There's where we met Mr. Danny, a white man who had a couple boys about the same age as Derrick and me. He coached Little League football and helped organize our street football games. For the first time I learned something about a sport and really loved it. When the Little League season started up, Mr. Danny helped Derrick and me get on the team.

I was hoping for a better Christmas that year, but by Christmas Eve there still wasn't anything under our scraggly little tree, and I was getting angrier and angrier. Then a knock came on the door. It was Mr. Danny and his two sons, Chris and Gerald.

Mr. Danny was dressed up as Santa Claus and walked in saying, "Ho, ho, ho! Merry Christmas. Santa hasn't been by to bring you your gifts yet has he?"

"No," I admitted, staring down at the floor. It wasn't likely that Santa would make it this year again either.

"Well, I'm just one of Santa's helpers. Hmm …" He stroked his chin and assumed a puzzled look on his face. "I get his directions wrong sometimes. What was it you were hoping for, Damien?"

I shrugged. "I wanted that 'Thin Ice' game, but …" I glanced at our bare tree and shrugged.

His sons were standing there with him inside our open door, grinning like they'd eaten my piece of pie.

“Is that right?” Mr. Danny stepped back out on the porch and picked up a green pillowcase with stuff in it. “It just so happens Santa put a Thin Ice game in my toy bag, and I think he said it was for you. Here, Damien, and Merry Christmas.”

His sons joined in on the Merrry Christmas.

“What about, Derrick? What did you want for Christmas this year?”

In a moment, Derrick had his wish, too, and our visitors headed back down the steps chanting, “Ho, ho, ho! Merry Christmas,” over and over.

There was never a toy I wanted so much and played with so little. They were good people, but somehow their generosity was humiliating. It was like the good thing they were trying to do simply showed up what a sorry state our family was in.

What was worse, Mom made us go to their house the next day and thank them. We stayed awhile because they had a big trampoline we liked to play on. I jumped and jumped. Chris told me to get off because he wanted a turn, but I kept on jumping. He reached in and tried to grab my leg, but I avoided him.

Suddenly he cursed and shouted, “I can’t stand you Niggers!”

I quit jumping on the trampoline, gradually slowing to a stop. I looked at Derrick, and I could see in his eyes he was

ready to fight them if I so much as gave a nod. Instead, I hopped down and we left without saying a word.

Maybe Gerald told his dad what Chris had said, I don't know, but that evening Mr. Danny came knocking on our door again, and he had both of his sons in tow.

"We're here to apologize," said Mr. Danny with tears in his eyes. "Chris shouldn't have said that." He turned to his sons. "Chris …"

"Sorry."

Mr. Danny wasn't satisfied. "Chris," he said sharply, "how can you call someone that? How can you insult someone so badly? We taught you boys that we don't say that in this family. How could you ever do that?"

I could see he was very sincere. It was like Chris had disgraced their family rather than ours. Mr. Danny begged our forgiveness and said if there was ever anything he and his wife, Laurie, could do to just let them know.

Derrick and I genuinely accepted Mr. Danny's apology, but it was never the same between us and Chris and Gerald, even though we still went over to their house to play some times.

After Christmas, both Derrick and I seemed to "go off" at any little provocation, and we weren't the only ones in the family who were losing it, either. Jason, my brother just older than Derrick, had some kind of a mental breakdown. I never understood it. He wasn't psychotic or anything, but he

started starving himself. He'd been a pretty big guy—180 pounds, tall and well built—but he starved himself down to 95 pounds before Mom took him to the hospital. They said if she hadn't brought him in when she did, he could have been dead in less than a week. They put him in a mental hospital and kept him locked in there for a couple months.

At the same time, my sister May was bulimic, throwing up everything she ate, so she ended up in the hospital, too, though not for as long.

For the first time it dawned on me that as a family we were really in trouble. Before that, I was just angry because nothing went the way I wanted it to go, but with Mom being electrocuted so many times, nothing for Christmas or dinner, and Jason and May going to the mental hospital, we seemed to be falling apart. Kevin, our oldest brother, had already gone back to Florida to live with our aunts, and that's where Jason went when he got out of the hospital. May didn't come home, either. It was scary. The only good thing was, with only Rickie, Vince, Derrick, Rose, and me left, our apartment wasn't so crowded.

Mr. Danny made good on his offer to help if we ever needed anything. One day Derrick and I were over there playing with Chris and Gerald when the phone rang. Mr. Danny was home and answered the call.

"What? … Are you okay? … No, I'll be right there." He turned to us. "It's your mom. She'd had some kind of an accident and needs help." He grabbed his jacket and headed for the door with us following. "No, no! You boys stay here. You don't need to see this."

“See? See what?” We tried to follow.

As he swung the door closed, he said, “Chris and Gerald, you keep ’em here!” And then he was gone.

A moment later we heard his car start and peel around the corner, tires screeching. Why’d he take the car? we wondered. We only lived a few doors away, around the corner. Peering through the window and across the neighbor’s backyard we could actually see the front door of our apartment on the next street. Mr. Danny ran up the steps and went right in without knocking. It happened so fast that we could hardly catch our breath, but the fear was rising in us like someone was pouring water too fast into a glass.

I started for the door. “Mom must really be hurt!”

Both Chris and Gerald grabbed me. “No, man. Dad said you guys have to stay here.”

“He’s bringing her out,” Derrick said. He was still staring out the window like he couldn’t believe what he was seeing.

Sure enough, Mr. Danny was carrying our mom in his arms as he staggered down the steps. We couldn’t tell how badly she was hurt, but she was as limp as a rag doll, and the first thing that went through my mind was that she was dead.

Chris and Gerald couldn’t hold us back then. We charged out the door, but before we got there, Mr. Danny sped off with Mom in his car.

We ran up the steps and into the kitchen. The ceiling fan was lying at an angle on the floor in the middle of the room like a helicopter that had crashed, debris all around, and beside it was an old towel, so blood soaked it looked like a dirty mop.

What had happened?

It was several hours later before Mr. Danny brought Mom home from the hospital with a big bandage on her head and we found out all there was to know.

“I have no idea,” Mom said when Dad got home from work. “I was in the kitchen making coffee. The ceiling fan was on, as usual. Suddenly it crashed down on me, like it was attacking me or something.

“Well,” said Dad, “it’s a good thing we’re getting out of here.”

“Out of here?” Mom’s eyes widened. “What do you mean?”

“Didn’t I tell you? We got a notice that they’re evictin’ us.” Dad said it like he’d forgotten to mention that he’d finally found his lost blue socks.

“Evictin’ us? Didn’t you pay the rent last week like you said?”

“What? You want to stay in a place that’s falling down all around us? That could have killed you this afternoon. We’re better off moving.”

“But you said you were going to pay the rent. We were three months behind!”

Dad shrugged.

That started another big yelling match, and suddenly it struck me—as though I hadn’t known all a long—my parents didn’t love each other.

In fact, I realized I never saw them show any affection toward one another, no kissing or hugging, and never a kind word. It’s like they remained together only as a matter of convenience, and I was soon to discover why.

Yes, abuse hurts, makes me be violent
with sharp words.
When I feel crossed, retaliation is
on my mind first.
Still dirt only makes ugly issues
look worse.
And I love God, Jesus I’m young
and I’m on a search
For the truth. I’m not talkin’ ’bout You,
But on this earth there’s so many
evildoers deceivin’…
It’s a struggle trying to make it to heaven
with hell on
earth.

CHAPTER FIVE

MY FOLKS moved us to the Lodge on Buford, a total dump of an extended-stay motel. All we had was one room with a little kitchenette along the wall. My older brothers and sister were all out on their own, so it was just our folks and the four of us younger ones. The motel was made up of featureless three-story buildings arranged around a bare yard that felt like a prison yard with the grass mostly worn away. The only windows for the units were sliding patio doors that opened onto little balconies. But for some reason, Mom got it into her head that she wanted the drapes pulled all the time and the lights off, so the place was always dark and dingy.

I transferred to Rock Bridge Elementary School where I continued doing pretty well academically in the fourth grade. But I was embarrassed at being a floater. A simmering rage boiled inside me, like little bubbles rolling under my skin, up and down my arms. And the Lodge on Buford was one of the worst, infested by roaches, prostitutes, pimps, and drug addicts. You couldn't walk around the neighborhood without bumping into the addicts, sometimes stoned out of their minds or sniveling and shaking because they couldn't find a fix. It was a filthy dump where the poorest of the poor lived in whatever way they could.

Shoshang, a Chinese kid who lived there, said he knew karate and could whip me … and everyone else in the whole

world if he wanted to. One day he stole a dollar from a younger kid.

The rage boiling inside me heated up. “Give him back his dollar!”

“Oh yeah? Who’s gonna make me?” “You better give him back his dollar!” “Whaddaya gonna do ’bout it?”

I grabbed for it, and in my lunge didn’t see his fist coming until it connected right in my eye. At first I couldn’t believe he’d punched me and just stood there staring at him, blinking to clear my vision.

“Ooo. He’s givin’ me the evil eye. Maybe I should run.”

I kept staring as I grew more and more angry inside. I could almost taste blood in my mouth … not because my mouth was bleeding, but because of my rage, so intense I started to black out. Suddenly, I hit him so hard it was like an explosion. His nose burst open and blood streamed down his face as he flew backwards into a tree. But that wasn’t enough for me. I continued pounding on his face and then took his head and started banging it against the tree. It was like I was trying to kill him.

Finally, someone grabbed me and pulled me off of him, or I don’t know what would have been the result. Afterward I didn’t feel any guilt or remorse. As far as I was concerned, this guy had it coming and I showed him something he needed to see.

Derrick was having the same problems, but mostly in school.

Unfortunately, money wasn't any better in our family, so we didn't last long at the Lodge on Buford. In a couple months, we moved again, this time to a sleazy place called the Shallowford Lodge, "Weekly and Daily Rates," the sign out front advertised. Out back there was a pool, but the place was still a dump, dingy dark hallways lit by greenish florescent tubes, half of which were always burnt out. But we did stay in the same school district this time, so people didn't obviously know we were still "floaters."

I was only nine years old, but Derrick, being three years older, started attracting a lot of girls. The problem was, I had started Rock Bridge Elementary in the middle of the year, so we were still outsiders, and this created a lot of jealously. He got in fights almost every day, and since we were bigger now, these weren't just little feather rufflers. People were getting hurt.

One day I came home from school a little late and saw Derrick, my dad, and my mom all sitting around with blank, sullen looks on their faces like zombies. "Hey, wassup? What's the matter with you all?"

"Humph." Derrick got up and stalked out on the front steps. I followed, bugging him until I finally got the story. He'd gotten in another fight, and the school had called home complaining and saying he'd been suspended. "So Dad thought he was gonna straighten me out with a belt. Well, that wasn't gonna happen."

My mom had followed us and stood on the steps with her arms crossed. “Yeah, we were upstairs, and Derrick just flipped out, saying stuff like, ‘You ain’t gonna whip me. You ain’t never gonna whip me again!’ Then he tried to jump out the window and kill himself. I barely caught him at the last minute.”

I kind of sided with Derrick against my dad. No kid likes being whipped or likes thinking he might be next. But whew! Would Derrick actually do that? I couldn’t imagine it, but something heavy sure had gone down the way everyone was moping around like the planets had been jolted out of alignment.

We finally moseyed back inside and hung around with the TV blaring, as if we were all deaf and blind to one another.

After that, Derrick stayed out most evenings. One night I discovered why. Across the parking lot, up on this little hill under some high power lines, I found him sitting there all by himself smoking weed.

That was the beginning, because pretty soon I began to join him.

* * * *

Before summer arrived, Dad said the Saladmaster sales weren’t going very well, so he couldn’t pay the weekly rent. In almost no time, we got evicted. This time we came home from school to find all our clothes, the TV, a couple chairs and all our junk piled out by the dumpsters at the end of the parking lot. I stomped around, a scowl on my face, just

daring any kid to say anything to us or even look at us. If they had, I'd have lit into them faster than the snap of the fingers.

Mom was angry about it, too. How could we get any lower? She started yelling at Dad. "Greg, you never do nothing for these kids! You're a loser, Greg, a loser! You don't do nothing. You don't even take care of your own kids. You don't even care about 'em!"

"Wait a minute! Wait a minute! Who's the only one who brings in any money around here?"

"Money? What money? You know you spend it all on you-know-what. I know what you're doing out there at night, Greg. And it's destroying this family."

But all the yelling couldn't change the fact that we'd been evicted. From Shallowford we ended up at Sparrow's Walk Apartments.

I was so mad that the day my dad came home with a big knot on his head and some scratches on his face, I figured he had it coming … until someone said, "Hey, man, I hear your dad got beat up by the cops."

"What? Whaddya mean, my dad got beat up by the cops?"

The guy just shook his head and grinned this silly grin at me like he was saying, "You dumb kids. You don't even know what's going on, do you?" Then he walked away.

That night I got brave and brought it up when everyone was sitting around. "So, some guy said you got arrested. Is

that what happened to your head?”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Mom look at Dad and shake her head.

Finally, Dad said, “Well, yeah. It was a cop, but it was all a big mistake.” He shook his head like it was all unbelievable. “I did something really stupid, so learn from me. I ran from the police because I hadn’t done anything wrong, but that just caused them to chase me, and when they caught me, well …” He pointed to his head with a wry grin. “Anyway, once they took me in to the station, we got it all worked out. So everything’s cool. Okay?”

* * * *

Maybe that argument had some beneficial effect, because somehow Dad was able to accumulate enough money for us to move out of the Sparrow’s Walk … this time into the only house we ever had in Atlanta: 1485

Country Downs. It wasn’t much, but it was a whole lot better than anything we’d seen in a long time. It was a little ranch with the backyard sloping down into some woods. It looked like the former residents had used the front yard for parking junk cars because there were big oil stains on the bare dirt. But so what, it was ours, and it had three bedrooms, space for all of us: Derrick and I shared one bedroom, and our sisters, Rose and little Angel, another.

Still, our folks didn’t get it because they had much money. It was the pure mercy of a lady who felt sorry for us, so she

didn’t require any security deposit and for a while tolerated late rent payments and all our craziness.

But we hadn’t been there long before Dad announced he had to go away for a while. We had no idea what he was talking about, so we didn’t pay much attention … until the next morning when a couple cop cars pulled up to our house. Dad got in the back of one car and rode away, and suddenly we realized he was going to jail.

The other cop—his name was Officer Honeycutt— stood at the door talking intensely in a hushed voice to our mom. We kids all sat in the kitchen, too scared to come out, but we heard him say, “You need to tell your children what’s going on, because if you don’t, they’re going to find out later on, and they’re gonna hate you for it.”

“But I’d rather they not know at all. Why should they know?”

“Ma’am, they’re gonna find out. Someone else is bound to tell them. You know how kids are. It might even end up in the paper; I can’t say. In any case, it’s better if you tell them.”

We heard Mom sigh. “Yeah. I guess you’re right.” When he left, Mom set Angel up in front of the TV with a snack to watch cartoons, then she came into the kitchen.

“Sit down, y’all. I’ve got something to tell you.” Her voice sounded dry, as if she’d been out in the hot wind all day without water.

We sat down in those plastic-covered seats around the Formica-topped table and stared at her. Her face looked as if her heart was about to break. “Look, I’m gonna tell you guys why your dad is in jail.” She sighed deeply. “He’s in jail because he was soliciting male prostitutes.”

At first it didn’t register. It was like she’d said he’d been eating jellybeans or something. Then suddenly: What? It was like static sparked through my head. Soliciting male prostitutes? Enough of what she meant got through that I looked back and forth at Derrick and Rose to see if they’d heard the same.

Finally, Rose spoke up. “You’re not saying he’s gay, are you?”

Again Mom sighed like she couldn’t get enough air to speak.

“What are you sayin’?” Derrick challenged.

Suddenly, I had a flashback … all the way back to when we lived in Florida when I was only five or six. Our older brothers—half brothers, really—were mad at Dad for some reason, and they took it out on Derrick and me by mocking us. “You’re dad ain’t no good. He’s just a lazy faggot.”

“No he ain’t,” I had screamed back, not even knowing what the word meant. Of course, by now I knew, but still I blurted out to my mom, “No he’s not. He can’t be.”

She rolled her eyes, not in exasperation, but like she was just terribly tired. “Come with me.”

I didn’t want to go with her. I didn’t want to hear any more of this.

“Come on.” She led the three of us out to our dad’s car and opened the trunk. Inside she unzipped his gym bag and lifted up a towel. Underneath, the bag was completely filled with male porno magazines, a huge bag of condoms—maybe a hundred of them—and a bunch of video tapes. She grabbed a tape and slammed the trunk. “Come with me,” she said and led us back into the house and downstairs into the basement where we had another TV hooked up to a VCR player. She stuck in the tape and pressed Play. In a moment the screen was filled with male porno, men sleeping with men, naked men dancing together. She let it run only a minute or so before shutting it off and turning to us. “Now you see?”

Certainly we did … but we didn’t. How could this be? It must all be some big mistake. I must have been getting it all wrong.

Derrick glared at her. “So, what you’re trying to say is that he’s gay?”

“Yes. He’s gay.”

“But how can that be? He’s married to you. He’s our father.”

“Oh yeah, he’s your father. But that don’t mean nothin’.”

“Then why’d he get married?”

“He says he knew he was gay five years before he married me, but he wanted to have children. He just wanted to have some kind of a normal family, but ever since then he’s lived on the down low.”

“And you’ve known this for how long?” Derrick challenged, resentment in his voice.

“Almost … almost from when we first got married.” She said it with such weariness the words barely came out.

“You mean he doesn’t love you?” I asked. Suddenly it all came together why they fought so much, why I’d never seen any expressions of affection between them.

Mom shook her head. “Well, he sure don’t love me in that way.”

“So why are you still with him?”

She wiped her forehead on her arm. “Because … because I simply wanted you kids to have a father. Too many kids grow up without a father these days.”

“Ha,” said Derrick, “like we need a father like that!”

Done been the youngest brother.
Wish I was a little bigger so I could
save Christmas.
Never had a good December.
Went back to school with the same
rude attitude, same shirt, same shoes,
same jacket, too. And had to move every
time
they got the feeling to.
Then got the news that my daddy was a
queer
… from who? My own mama had to sit us
down
and tell the whole truth.
Now how could Daddy
be a faggot and a Christian, too.
He foolin’ who?

CHAPTER SIX

“I STILL don’t understand why the cops came and took him to jail.” Not that I cared. They could keep him in jail as far as I was concerned. What’d he ever do for us? He’d never been there for us. We nearly starved sometimes. But I was to learn more.

“Come on back upstairs,” Mom said. “I need a drink.” Once she’d poured herself a Captain Morgan and Coke, she sat down at the table with us. “Remember last year when he came home with that big knot on his head and told you it was all a big mistake, that he’d been wrongfully arrested? Well, that’s not what happened.”

“Yeah,” Derrick snarled, “Well, I never believed that crock from the start.”

Mom just looked at him, then closed her eyes for a moment like she was trying to gather her thoughts before continuing. “What really happened was, he went over to Piedmont Park to pick up a ‘friend,’ as he likes to call ’em. Friend, ha! Your dad just likes to sleep with male prostitutes. The way they get hooked up is by walking along and looking at each other, kind of flirting. Then one touches the other’s privates. If he responds, then the first one says,

‘How much?’ and they’re on.”

This was definitely far more than I wanted to know. I couldn’t imagine my dad doing that! But mostly I was mad

that he had deceived us our whole life.

“Anyway, one night Officer Honneycutt was operating undercover in Piedmont Park. When your dad made a move on him, Honeycutt grabbed his hand and cuffed him.” Mom stopped like it was all over.

“How’d he get beat up, then?” Rose asked.

“According to Officer Honeycutt, when he was examining your dad’s ID, he made a break for it and took off running. Honeycutt says he didn’t hit him or anything. Your dad simply tripped and fell into a big hole where they were doing some construction—that’s how he got roughed up. But he still ended up with a charge for resisting arrest. That’s why he had to go to jail.”

“But that was a long time ago!” Didn’t seem fair to me. “Court cases take time. Now he’s gotta serve his.”

“Does he have HIV or AIDS? Is he gonna die?” asked Rose. Mom shrugged. “I don’t think so.” She said of it so matter-of-factly that my head swam.

I sat there in a daze. So my older brothers were right back there in Miami when they called him a faggot. Not a nice word, but it was true. He’d really put one over on us. I had this feeling like … what if my whole life was a fraud? What if these weren’t even my parents? Maybe I’d been adopted… or even kidnapped. What if nothing I’d believed in my whole life was true?

A growl from Derrick awakened me from my thoughts. He was gritting his teeth. “I’m gonna kill him. I’m gonna do it. I’m gonna kill him!” That scared me. When Derrick said something in that way, with that look on his face, he did it.

A few weeks passed before Dad came home from jail. By then we’d lost our house. Even our merciful landlady ran out of mercy when we couldn’t pay month after month— can’t blame her. We were living in another cheap motel—Hometown Inn. Derrick didn’t kill Dad when he came home. But things were different from then on.

One morning Dad tried to correct Derrick for something that had happened at school. “Don’t you be telling me what to do!” snapped Derrick. “Who do you think you are?”

“I’m your father, that’s who, and you better watch your mouth.”

“Father? You ain’t no father to me. So get outta my face before I lay you out!” Derrick pulled back his fist ready to hit him.

“Oh yeah? You want some of me? Why don’t you try it! Just try it!”

I thought Derrick was gonna slug him right then, and I don’t know what would have happened if he had. Instead, my dad pushed Derrick, and Derrick turned away, stormed into our room and slammed the door. Dad threw his shoulders back and gave me a look as if to say, “You see that? I’m still the top dog around here.”

But when I went into our room, Derrick was taping the handle of a large stick, almost like a bat. “Whatchu doin’, man?”

He just rolled his eyes at me.

“Man, you need to calm down. This could end up with you in jail, man.”

“Or him in a box.” Derrick stopped taping and looked up at me. “He ain’t never gonna touch me again.”

“Yeah, you right, but this ain’t the time or the way.” “Then when?”

“I don’t know, but just chill for now and think about it. Okay?”

Surprisingly, my brother dropped the stick, flopped down on the futon on the floor we used for a bed—we still didn’t have any real furniture—and turned toward the wall. I didn’t stay in the room. He needed some space.

But about two weeks later, I found a composition notebook in which Derrick had written how he wanted to murder my dad. He planned to cover the floor with black plastic and cut him to pieces like a butcher. I read page after page of gory details, how he would dispose of the remains and never get caught. It would be like our dad walked out of the apartment one day and never came back. It gave me chills down my spine just to read it, but I never said anything to anyone, never warned Dad, even though in a crazy kind of way I kind of still loved him.

The verbal battles continued, and each time I'd think, Okay, this is it!…

"Derrick, I heard you were talking in class today and got detention. What's the matter with you?"

"Don't tell me why I got detention. Just shut up. I don't what to hear nothin' from you!"

"You keep talkin' to me like that, and you're gonna see what happens!"

"Yeah? Well, I'm still talkin', so what you gonna do about it?"

Derrick had no respect for him and showed it in every way possible. But the thing that really made me mad was that after Dad came home, he never mentioned why he'd been away, never apologized, even though I'm sure he knew we knew. He just acted like he'd done nothing. That made me so angry, but I kept it all inside, maybe waiting to see what Derrick would finally do.

When our older brothers—Rickie and Vince—found out about Dad getting arrested and spending those weeks in jail, they were furious. One day when they were at the apartment, we got talking about dad, and Vince said, "We told you he was gay."

"Yeah," said Rickie. "Now you know where all his money goes."

"What money?"

“Ah, man, he ain’t doing that bad when he works. I happen to know he made over eight thousand in the last two weeks. So where do you think it all went?”

I thought about it. He’d bought each of us kids a new pair of tennis shoes, and we hadn’t been evicted for several months…. But eight thousand bucks? “I dunno.”

“He spends it on gay clubs, that’s what. Think about it. You see him breeze through here every day around three or four o’clock in the afternoon, right? Next time you see him, he’s walking in the door at five or six in the morning. Where you think he’s been? He hasn’t been selling pots and pans all night.”

I shrugged to cover up the dead feeling inside. I’d never really thought about it.

“He’s been at those gay clubs … spending all the money. And y’all still sleepin’ on the floor up in here. Don’t be so dumb, Damien.”

* * * *

Maybe it was to get out of there that Derrick and I started spending more and more time at the house of our friends, J.C., Donnie, and Daron. Or maybe it was because we went there to smoke weed everyday. Their uncle smoked all the time. At first we’d say, “Come on, give us a hit off your joint.” He’d protest and tell us our father would get mad if he found out. “But he’ll never know,” we countered. “Besides, you let us do it before. You know you did.”

Pretty soon, after we kept nagging him, he started supplying us with weed, all the weed we wanted. By then, J.C., Donnie, and Daron were our best friends. Their dad owned a janitorial service, and he gave Derrick and me our first jobs, helping him clean a bowling alley. It was hard work, and Mr. Don—as we called Don Sr.—was a perfectionist. We had to wake up at midnight or two o'clock in the morning to catch a ride with him to the bowling alley and not get home again until around 6:30. We vacuumed, cleaned all the tables and the lanes, the bathrooms, took out the garbage, even cleaned the parking lot. And if we didn't do a good job—behind the game machines and everywhere—Mr. Don would snap: "You're making my name look bad! Get back in there and make it shine."

But for the first time in our life we had a little pocket money, twenty bucks a night.

Well, we may have had a little pocket money, but that didn't mean we got to keep it. Sometimes my mom or dad would come over to J.C. and Donnie's house, knowing we were hanging out there, and would start leaning on us. "C'mon, now, I'm tryin' to pay the rent," my dad said one day when he walked in on us watching TV at our friends' house. "You don't want to have to move again, do you? I gotta pay today, or they're gonna kick us out. Now I know you got some money, so come on, now. I just need thirty more bucks."

I waved him off. "No way, man. We're not even staying with you anymore. We been sleeping over here. So why should we be paying for your foolishness?"

“You give me some cash, or I’ll pawn that necklace of yours.” He pointed to a gold necklace I’d bought off someone.

“You ain’t getting’ this.” I grabbed my neck.

But my dad just stepped over, jerked my hand away, and broke it off me. “Sorry, but we need this.” And he walked out the door.

Smoldering, my mind began scheming ways to get back at them—set fire to the apartment, help Derrick “off” the old man—a hundred scenarios ran through my head.

But the contribution of my gold necklace didn’t cover the money problems for long. Two months later we were evicted again and had to move from Hometown Inn to Guesthouse Inn, but they were no more different than their names—the same shaggy, extended-stay motels.

We were fuming. What was it with us kids having to take care of ourselves? We needed parents who would provide a roof over our heads, sufficient food, and decent clothes. We wanted to look like the other kids at school. If our parents wouldn’t pay for those basics—if life was so unfair—why should we play by the rules? We’d find another way.

I knew how to steal. When I was little, Mom had punished me for stealing gum, but I knew she had a little black book that taught how to get around the law, how to do fraud, how to spot and take down a mark, how to lie and manipulate people. She wouldn’t let many people look inside that book, but as we got older she taught us how to steal and get away

with it, anyway. She never actually told us to go out and steal something, but she would talk in hypotheticals: “This store’s manager is so dumb. Look at that merchandise. A person could just …” and she would tell us how it could be stolen. And we often witnessed her “gettin’ over on someone,” manipulating and lying. And she was an expert at it.

So I started stealing the clothes I thought I needed and deserved: Nike shoes, Eddie Bower shirts, Tommy Hilfiger chinos, Timberland boots. I’d go into a shoe store wearing an old pair of shoes that I didn’t want anymore and ask the clerk to let me try on some shoes, maybe some high-end Timberlands.

“Ah, these are pretty nice,” I’d say. “But they feel a little tight. Mind if I walk around in them a little bit?” In a few minutes I’d ask him if he could get me a larger size or some other style, and as soon as he went in the back, I’d put my old shoes in the box and walk out of the store in the new ones.

In a clothing store, I’d pick up two shirts of the same size, color, and style and go into the dressing room carrying them in a way that the clerk thought I had only one. Inside, I’d put one on underneath my old shirt, then walk out and hand the other new shirt to the clerk. “Could you put this back on the rack for me? I’m not exactly sure where it goes.” Or I’d put it back myself, being sure the clerk saw me do it. Then I’d walk out.

Of course, most stores now are onto such tactics. But back then we stole whatever we wanted and built up a whole

wardrobe so we could look cool at school, because we sure didn't want people to know what a hard-luck life we came from. But it was a stressful way to live, and pretty soon I was smoking more and more weed just to cope. Different kinds of marijuana have different effects on people. Some makes you want to be quiet, some makes you want to be active, some makes you hyper, some makes you laugh, some makes you super hungry.

Before this time in my life, I just played around with marijuana, but one day Donnie said, "Come on, Damien, take a hit off this blunt with me. It's really fine stuff. Like nothin' you ever had before." A blunt is a cigar that's been hollowed out and filled with weed, and this weed made me so high I felt as if I was walking on a cloud.

"Hey man," I said, "let's go to the store and buy something to eat."

Off we went, both of us as high as kites. We were so high we were paranoid. We thought a barking dog was after us and took off running. We heard sirens in the distance and thought the cops were coming for us. When we finally made it to the store, everything seemed sooo slow, slow, slow. I turned my back a few moments, and when I looked back, Donnie was lying in the freezer, one of those open-topped freezers with packages of frozen corn and peas and beans in the bottom.

He grinned up at me, laughing. "It's … it's cold. It's cold in here."

We laughed all night, it seemed. And the more we laughed, the more I liked it. Weed was the way to live. In spite of going through the D.A.R.E program at school and promising myself I would never be a druggie, I was no longer just experimenting, no longer taking a toke just to hang with Derrick, Daron, Donnie, and J.C. I loved it. I started smoking weed more and more. Then I added alcohol to the mix and kept a buzz on all the time.

Of course weed and booze don't really relieve stress. They just mask it. By the time I was in the sixth grade, I was having such constant pain in my stomach, especially when I ate, that I went to the doctor. After doing some tests and examining me, the doctor turned to me—even though my mom was sitting right there—and said, "Listen, I don't know what's stressing you out, but you better do something about it. You've got some serious peptic ulcers…."

Ulcers? I thought that was something only harried old businessmen got when they ate too much rich food.

The doctor was still speaking. "…because whoever is stressing you out, they're going to be still living, and you're gonna be dead if you keep holding everything inside. You're too young to be having these problems. You'd better start letting it out!"

Ulcers. Stress. Quit holding it in! It was like I threw a switch that day. I wasn't going to be quiet anymore. I wasn't going to hold it all in. I was going to let it rip. And rip I did. It didn't matter whether I was at home, on the street, or in school, anyone who crossed me in the least way got it with both

barrels. I’d start shouting, “Whatchu gonna do? You gonna hurt me? You try it, and I’ll kill you!”

I’m tired of living in this hellhole.
So many lost souls
Burning ’cause of lies told.
Come on out the blindfolds.
Truth, see the crookedness in you ….
It would be better for your soul if you do.
Can’t live on lies. Enough deception
has been dealt
To spread aggression from Atlanta to Tibet.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CHRISTMAS MORNING 1995 dawned cold and crisp, below freezing, actually. Would we get the first white Christmas Atlanta had seen in over a hundred years? Probably not. Clouds might be rolling in soon, but they'd probably bring warmer temperatures. At least we could pretend. Even though we were still in that creepy motel, the Guesthouse Inn, we hoped this Christmas might be better than all the others. For some reason I was an eternal optimist. Maybe we all were. Even when moving from one ratty motel to another, we always hoped things would be better, that this was the beginning of a new day, a new life.

But when we kids got up that morning after sleeping on the floor of the cramped motel room, there was nothing but two or three little gifts for our baby sister, Angel. Nothing, not even a card or a five-dollar bill for me or Rose or Derrick. Even though this kind of disappointment had happened so many times, the wound felt as fresh and deep as it had when I was six or seven.

My thoughts spun out. How dare you spend all your money on those clubs and not do one thing for us? I wasn't going to take it anymore. "So, where are our gifts?" I blurted.

"What? … You talkin' to me?" Dad put the coffee pot on the hot plate.

"Yeah. What about us?"

“Oh, I didn’t get anything for y’all. Angel’s the baby, so we had to at least get her somethin’, but I couldn’t afford anything else.” He shrugged and turned back to check the coffee.

We three kids exchanged angry glances. Even Mom chimed in. “Greg, that’s wrong. You can’t do that to your kids. It’s not fair to do something for one and not the others.” She knew he had plenty of money and could have given us a nice Christmas if he hadn’t spent it all the night before out clubbing.

“Look, I did what I could, so get off my back, will ya?” An houror so later, our older brothers—Rickie and Vince—came over, and when they discovered what had happened, they lit into him, too. “Man. Greg”—they always called him by his first name because he wasn’t their father—“you didn’t get them nothin’? How can you do that? How can you not buy your own kids something for Christmas? You’re a pathetic excuse for a man, a sorry Nigga. You just ain’t no good. We’ve been tryin’ to tell them that all along.”

Somehow all this badgering broke him down, and he began talking. “Well, I didn’t ask for this.”

“Whatchu mean, you didn’t ask for this? You may be a faggot, but you’re still their father, ain’t you?”

“Yeah, but I didn’t want this.” He waved his hand around the room. Pouring a cup of coffee, he sank into a chair at the little table. “Look, I was gay five years before I met your mother.”

Oh, man. He was admitting it!

“Then why’d you marry her?” Rose demanded. Mom stiffened in the straight-back chair where she sat on the other side of the table, her lips pinched so tightly you could hardly tell where her mouth was.

“Look, she came to me. I didn’t go after her.”

We all got quiet, some of us sitting on the floor, some on the bed.

Dad looked around at us, seeing that we weren’t buying it. “Yeah. She was interested in me. She talked to my brother Ray first, and he told her I was gay, but she didn’t believe him.”

“Ha!” Mom put in. “No, no. I thought he meant you were a happy-go-lucky guy.”

“Well, I still told you. And you told me you were some kind of witchdoctor, a voodoo princess or something. So, we knew. We both knew.”

“Still,” Rose persisted, “why’d you marry her?”

Dad shrugged. “Guess I wanted children … wanted a family. So … so we hooked up, and then when she was pregnant with Derrick, we got married. That was it.”

“Yeah, and on our wedding night,” Mom snarled, “on our wedding night …” She slammed her fist down on the table. “… you went out and slept with some man!”

We listened to the two of them, dumbfounded.

“What else was I supposed to do? On our wedding night you wanted to do a séance or whatever with that demon, Obi, or whoever it was you prayed to.” He turned to the rest of us. “It’s like this demon was controlling her and had power over her. This was going on even before we got married. He would require her to do things. She called him her protector. She’d go in a room by herself, and all of a sudden the whole place would start shaking. Even outside, the lights would flicker, and I could hear things crashing, and then she’d begin screaming. I didn’t want to, but I’d go in and find her with slashes on her… It was crazy.”

“Oh,” snorted Mom, blowing smoke from the skinny Capri cigarette she’d been sucking on. “So you neglecting your own children on Christmas day is all my fault.”

Dad snorted. “I didn’t say that. We tried to make a go of it. We’ve stayed together, haven’t we? And we had Rose, but … but to be honest now, I wish I never did. And him,” he nodded toward me, “you know you tricked me into getting pregnant with him. You poked holes in my condoms or something. I told you to get rid of him. Now we got too many mouths to feed. So don’t be blamin’ me for no Christmas presents.”

Everyone sat there stunned while in my head a booming voice was saying, Damien’s a mistake! Damien shouldn’t be on this earth! Damien, your own father didn’t want you!

Finally, Dad spoke again. “So now you all know….” He looked around, making eye contact with all of us. “Oh yeah,

one more thing: I’m HIV positive.”

That was it! That was Christmas, 1995 for me, Damien Jackson, age thirteen.

I was numb after that blow-out with Dad. I couldn’t even speak. Later, Derrick and I went for a walk, and all we did was glance at one another from time to time with a sullen look on our faces. Before this, our world wasn’t much, but now it felt like the whole bottom had dropped out of even that. After all, I wasn’t even supposed to be here.

When we came back to the motel, Rickie and Vince were outside leaning on the fender of their car, listening to music. Vince grinned at us. “Look who’s dragging back. Can’t find anyone else who wants you, either?” They both laughed. Neither one seemed to know when to shut up. They always joked about the wrong things at the wrong time. “So, you boys gay, too? You think about men?”

No, we didn’t think about men, not in that way for sure. But what was the use in talking about it to these bulls? They’d just trample on my already mangled spirit.

But there was someone I could talk to. I’d gotten to like a girl in school named Sasha. It may have been nothing but puppy love, but she cared. I knew she cared. I really, really liked her, and we had a good thing going. We went to the movies almost every week, and we sometimes held hands walking between classes in school. Sometimes I’d read her my poems or tell her about what was going on in my family. Nothing seemed to rattle her. She was always there for me.

In fact, when another girl started sending me flowers and trying to pick up on me in school, Sasha charged into her classroom and started beating on the girl, yelling, “You leave Damien alone! You don’t care for him. He’s mine.”

Sasha had never gotten in trouble in school before, and her grades were good, so I don’t know why the school responded so harshly, but Sasha was expelled. Her family ended up moving from Atlanta to Ohio to get her back into school, and that broke my heart even more.

It just seemed like one thing after another went wrong for me.

* * * *

Shortly after this, Mom decided to leave Dad. But the only way she was able to do it was to take up with someone else. She met a truck driver named Charles and moved into his room in another shabby motel—a horrible no-name place—and dragged us with her, even though he was an alcoholic.

At about the same time, Rose ran away and got pregnant with a guy. She left with him, and we didn’t see or hear from her for nearly ten years. Derrick had already dropped out of school, and I was only attending because it was expected. But what was the use? I was so angry that I constantly snapped at the teachers and anyone else who challenged me about anything. They didn’t know anything about me. They didn’t care about my life or what I was going through at home. So what gave them the right to talk to me about what I was doing in the classroom? “I don’t want to hear it. You shut up! You don’t talk to me about what I’m doing.

Whatever I’m doing, I’m doing, but don’t you talk to me about it, cause I don’t want to hear it!”

In spite of my vow to not hold my anger inside any longer —because of my stomach ulcers—I don’t think I ever really released it. I was afraid if I really let it out, I would kill someone or do some other horrible thing. Most of my teachers never knew that my outbursts to them were only a small spark in comparison to the explosion that was threatening to erupt.

One day in Ms. Hamilton’s class, my friend PD was talking. We sat in the back, and we always talked back and forth to each other when we should have been listening. But on this occasion, it was PD who was talking, not me. Ms. Hamilton spoke up and said, “Damien, would you please be quiet.”

“What? You be quiet! What do you mean tellin’ me to be quiet? You shut up. I’m doing what I’m doing.”

“Don’t talk to me like that, Damien. I’m not going to let you talk to me like that in—”

“Shut up! Just shut up before you wish you had!” “Damien, I warned you. Now get out of my class.” “Fine! I don’t care. Good-bye!” I got up, threw my desk over, and charged up the aisle toward her.

Her eyes got big, and she hit the panic button. Every classroom had a panic button in case of an emergency. “Security, security. Come and get Damien immediately! Immediately!”

A security guy followed by Principal Doswell arrived in a moment, but I was still lit up. I pointed my finger at them and backed up—don't know where I thought I was going. "You shut up! I don't care what you got to say. If you get close to me, I don't care, I'll knock you out."

"Calm down. Calm down, now." At least the security guy was trying. Maybe he sensed there was a lot more rage inside me that hadn't even begun to come out. For some reason, they kept trying to work with me, even sent me to a counselor. I didn't have a problem with her even though she kept asking me what was going on at home, stuff I couldn't talk about.

The strange thing was, Ms. Hamilton taught language arts and I liked poetry, so when we got to a section on poetry, I'd straighten up so I could remain in class. And I got good grades for poetry, enough to compensate for all my other failures and allow me to pass.

All this time I was smoking weed at school before school, after school, in the bathrooms—it didn't matter. I reeked of the smell of weed smoke all the time, but I didn't care.

The only other adult who got through to me was Coach Mimi who talked me into joining the weight lifting squad. He was one of the few people who knew how to handle me because he was a military man and wouldn't tolerate any junk from anyone.

When I tried getting smart with him, he'd say, "Damien, who in hell do you think you're talking to? Drop and give me twenty, right now." He was big enough to make me, so I'd

do it. I ended up hurting myself a couple times, but I made the weight lifting squad, even got my picture in the yearbook.

As I mentioned, by this time Rose had run off with her boyfriend, and Mom had sent our sister, Angel, to live with our aunts in Florida, so it was just Derrick and me living with our mom and that trucker dude in that scummy motel. But the trucker didn't like us, so he and Mom worked out a compromise of renting a second room for us boys to live in. That was pretty good, because we didn't like Charles, either, but we wanted to be close enough to take care of Mom.

Before long a prostitute began staying in our room. I didn't do anything with her—I don't know about Derrick— but mostly she used our room as a place to crash. This really made Charles angry, and maybe to get back at him, Derrick went out one night and tagged a semi truck parked in the lot, thinking it belonged to Charles. But it didn't, and when the management of the motel found out who had painted the truck, he kicked all of us out of that motel after only a few weeks … out on the street in the middle of winter.

Lord, I need some help with life.
What’s my choices?
Last night lost my sight,
was losin’ focus.
Persuaded by voices, I did things no
man dreams, unless he’s hopeless.
I planned things and carried ’em out.
Thought I was coastin’.
Flashback, back in the dayz when I was
open,
Young buck chill at the park watchin’ the
ocean.
We played rough, city was tough, muddy
your Jordans.
But these days, sneakers get scuffed, you
hearin’ noises.
And Trojans ain’t never enough you lettin’
hoes in.
In other words, watch your back, and trust
no man.

CHAPTER EIGHT

IT WAS the weirdest thing, we ended up going back to Shallowford Lodge, the same motel we'd lived in earlier when our mom and dad were still together. Of course, we were in a different room, but I kept going back and forth between feeling confident that I knew my way around the place and the neighborhood and a sick feeling of déjà vu that I was trapped in my hideous past, just going around in circles.

Perhaps in an attempt to escape, Derrick and I would go anywhere with anyone to get weed, and that's how we met Marcus. The guy was six-foot-three or -four and weighed over 250 pounds. He always packed a .38 revolver, but he just didn't think straight. He'd rob you in a minute if you weren't on your guard. He drove a big, old Cadillac, and one night we rode with him to the house of a guy they called Igod. We were all so high by the time we got there we were in a fog. But Marcus wanted more, and he claimed Igod owed him.

From where we had to park, we walked down a little hill to Igod's apartment, but before we got there, two cops came out of nowhere—at least we were too stoned to know where—and stopped us. "What are you guys doing in this neighborhood?"

"We're not doing anything, officer. Just here to see a friend."

They looked us up and down real suspicious-like, then said, “Okay, but you better not be getting into any trouble.

We’ve had some break-ins around here, and it better not be you.”

“Oh, it’s not us. We’re not trying to break into anyone’s house. We’re just going right down there to our friend’s place.” Marcus pointed to Igod’s apartment.

The cops nodded and let us go. But they stood there watching until they saw Igod let us in. Inside, there was a little “Hey-man-how-you-doin’?” and handshakes as Marcus introduced us. Then he got right down to business and demanded Igod cough up the drugs he owed him. Igod refused and Marcus hit him. Igod hit him back, and before we knew what was happening, they were throwing each other around the room and breaking stuff. Igod was a little smaller, but he was tough, and so the whole apartment was getting torn up. Suddenly, Igod broke free and ran into his bedroom. Marcus turned to us with wide eyes. “Let’s get out of here. He probably got a gun, and I didn’t bring mine.”

Igod came running back out of the bedroom, not with a gun, but with a big machete. Just as we flew out the door, Igod took a big swing at Marcus and barely missed taking off his head. Somehow Derrick and I got separated from Marcus and kept running up the hill to where we thought Marcus’s Cadillac was parked. A few moments later, a couple police cars came wheeling into the parking lot aiming their spotlights on us. “Stop right there,” roared the metallic voice from the speaker.

We stopped, trying not to look nervous as car doors slammed and the cops approached us, this time shining their flashlights in our eyes.

“Where you boys goin’ so fast?” “Just goin’ home, officer.”

“Yeah? Well, we got a call that there was a disturbance in one of the units around here. You hear anything?”

“No sir. No sir. We wasn’t payin’ no attention to anybody else’s business. We just on our way home.”

“Yeah, like fifteen minutes ago you were just goin’ in to see your friend nice and easy. Now you’re runnin’ away like bats outta hell. You turn around and assume the position up against the cruiser.”

My heart sank as they searched me, knowing they’d find the twenty-sack of weed in one of my pockets and a fold of cash in the other.

“So, what’s with this money? You out here sellin’?”

I knew I was going to jail then. The question was, for how long? “Oh, no sir. I only smoke it. I don’t sell nothin’.”

“Uh-huh. I bet.”

Another call crackled from the police radio. I couldn’t understand the codes, but one of the officers nodded to the other. Then he dumped out my weed, sprinkling it all over the street. “Tell you what I’m gonna do. I’m gonna give you guys a break tonight and let you go. But if I ever have to

stop you again for anything, you're going to jail. Understand?"

"Yes, sir. Yes, sir. Thank you. You won't have no more trouble from us. We promise."

The officers drove off, and we finally found Marcus's car, but he wasn't there. We didn't know what to do. We couldn't just hang around. What if the cops came cruising back by and saw us? Fortunately, Marcus showed up before long with his eye all swollen and a sour look on his face. As we headed home, I sat in the back, running the whole thing over and over in my head. Then it struck me, what if Marcus had had his gun with him? He'd have probably shot Igod … then we'd all be up for murder or at least attempted murder.

* * * *

Shallowford Lodge didn't last more than about four months. By summer, we'd moved again, this time to another extended-stay motel not far away called the Clairmont Lodge. Charles, who was mostly unemployed and drunk, made it increasingly clear that he hated us and didn't want us around. Derrick and I couldn't stand being in that dingy room with him, anyway, so we often went over to our older brother

Rickie's apartment to crash for a couple nights.

When we were at the Clairmont, we stayed out of the room as much as we could, hanging out around the pool, smoking dope. That's where we met this guy named Beatle, who was a great freestyle rapper. At first we felt self-conscious when

we tried rapping freestyle, but once we'd smoked enough, we got in the groove, thinking we were pretty good in our purple haze. As the days went by, we did get better and better until we could freestyle for hours on end even when we weren't high.

Rapping was perhaps the only halfway good thing to happen that summer, because the greater the tensions got with Charles, the more arguments Derrick and I had with each other, mostly over stupid things …

"Why were you talking to that girl? I wanted to talk to her."

"Whaddaya mean, man? I saw her first. Go find your own self a girl."

During one of our arguments, Derrick snatched up a knife and snarled at me, a demonic look in his eyes. "Look, I'll stab you! I'll stab you right now, you little piece of crap. Who you think you're trying to boss around?"

I was scared of his temper, afraid that one of these times when he went off like that he'd completely lose control. He waved the knife in front of my face. "Just say somethin' else! Just say it, and watch what I'll do. I'll cut your tongue out. Then you won't be sayin' nothin' ever again."

I wasn't a fool. I wasn't about to argue with a knife.

Our brother, Vince, had been pursuing music in a more serious fashion at this time. He'd written a song and one phrase stuck with me: "Sunrise, open my eyes to a cold city." Those words played over and over in my mind,

because that was my experience every day. Sitting by the pool one day, I started thinking about how this city was a cold city. People didn't love you, not even family. Words started coming into my head that went with that phrase, and in a few minutes I'd written a whole verse, just like when we were freestyling. But this time I took a lot more care. The words began to pour out, capturing all the feelings locked up inside me.

I showed the song to Derrick. He got inspired and wrote some verses, too, and they went together smoothly. We performed them for Vince when he came over, and he said, "What … you guys wrote that?"

"Yeah. Why?"

"Do it again, and let me see that paper."

MADNESS ANTHEM

Sunrise open my eyes to a cold city
Jealous Niggaz, relentless triggers, that's what killed many.
Mad man, shank in his hand, f#@! The world's pity.
Out of control, set to explode, cause the world's sh!ty.
Hard times, too many lies, got my mind gone.
And thoughts of gashing
Your face, is coming on strong.
Bruise, break, batter and bone crush a fag,
think fast or get that a@$ sent home,
In a six-foot pine box, bars is waxed chrome.
As I ride in the Cherokee, threats really
ain't scaring me.
Romelo in the Lex, regrets his first felony.

Butcha Bone Chillen, keep dealin' with all
them big dogs.
Golden tongue starts to kill'en with verbal discharge,
Now Shank's charged.
Energized, wise, paralyzed by signs of broken home,
Never close my eyes, never cry, fu&# feelings
cause they're gone.
Homicidal hotline, call Butcha bloody up they clothes.
With a Colt 45, pearl handle, barrel made of chrome.
Abandon the body, vacate the premise, don't be long.
(Chorus)
Madness is on the rise, till the day we die.
Mad man, shank in his hand, f#@! The world's pity.
Madness is on the rise, till the day we die.
Pump dumps, them bodies stunk, in the back trunk.

When we finished, Vince seemed impressed. "I've been working with this guy, Flip. He came down here from Philadelphia, and he's got a recording studio. I want you to come with me and spit it for him."

Flip's studio was in a small warehouse in a really squalid part of town. But the coolest thing was that he had all sorts of tracks for different beats. Vince picked just the right one, and it really worked.

"How long did it take you to write that?" Flip asked. "Just a little while, earlier this afternoon."

"Whadda ya say, Flip?" Vince said. "Ought to record it, don't you think?"

Flip gave a wry smile. “It’s easy to do it once. The question is, can they do it again?”

I jumped right in, thinking about my free-styling by the pool. “Yeah. Just give me a beat.”

So Flip cued up the beat, and I jumped in. I can’t say my lyrics were as good as the stuff Derrick and I had written down, but it did show we had some talent. We stayed at Flip’s place that night, where he lived in the studio. And the next day, we laid down another rap called “Trouble Child,” asking what kind of destiny awaits a trouble child? This time Flip laid down another track with a singer coming in over the verses. We watched Flip’s face as he worked the recording equipment. He seemed to be getting more and more excited that perhaps he had found some new talent.

The next day, we did another rap.

“Hey,” Derrick said, “maybe we ought to form a group and get serious about this.”

“You gotta be kiddin’,” Vince said. “Look, I’ve been working at this for years, and I don’t want no group. I’m a solo artist. I don’t know where you get off comin’ in here and takin’ over.”

“Chill,” said Flip. “We’re just experimenting here. Maybe it will go somewhere, maybe not. But no one’s cuttin’ you out. There’ll be a part for you, soon as we get it figured out.”

“No way, man. You charged me for laying down raps, but you letting these guys do it for free. That ain’t right!” Vince

stormed out of the studio, slamming the door.

Derrick and I looked at each other. That was just like our family. What else could we expect? But it created a big problem: How were we going to get back and forth to the studio if Vince was mad at us?

“Hey Flip, be okay if we just crash here with you for a while?”

“Yeah, I ’spose you can keep sleeping on the couch. But I don’t want you messing up things around here. You hear? And sometimes I got other business to attend to. You keep your nose completely out of that!”

We didn’t know what “that” was, but we agreed.

We kept experimenting, laying down songs. At first we called ourselves “Madness Anthem,” but that didn’t sound too cool. So we tried “Rush,” until someone told us there was a rock group by that name. We still liked it, so we changed the spelling to “Rusx.” Yeah, that was way cool and sounded like the name of a rap group. We then came up with the acronym: Real Unusual Symbolic Xtremist. “R” for real, meaning we were always who we were, wouldn’t fake anything. “U” for unusual, meaning we weren’t like everyone else. “S” for symbolic, meaning everything we did had a deeper meaning. And “X” stood for extremist. Everything we did, we went to the extreme.

At some point, every artist loses the Dream.
At some point, every diamond loses the gleam.
At some point, every smoker turns to fiend.
At some point, at some point.
At some point, everybody turns to crime.
At some point, everybody tells they lies.
At some point, everybody gotta die.
At some point, at some point.

CHAPTER NINE

IT WASN'T long before we found out what Flip's "other business" was. The money for Flip's studio had been put up by the Jamaican mafia. They needed a respectable-looking location through which they could move a lot of drugs, and a recording studio made the perfect front: an old warehouse with lots of space, legitimate reasons for different people to be coming and going day and night, especially wacked-out musician types who made a good cover for wacked-out dealers. Of course, to appear authentic, there had to be some real music coming from the place, too. And that's how Flip got the money to buy all his equipment and set up the studio. He was a real producer, and he did have connections in the music industry, but he wasn't the owner of the place.

We didn't snoop around, but there was no way we could miss the scary dudes who delivered boxes of marijuana every week. The boxes were big, sometimes a hundred pounds $100,000 worth of high quality weed or more. And there was no way we didn't see it get divided and sent back out on the streets. "When these guys come," Flip said, "you just stay quiet. Don't talk to them unless they talk to you, 'cause if they sense anything is wrong, they'll kill you on the spot.... They'd kill everyone in here, and I'm not ready to pack it in, so just stay in the background."

But every time they came, they did talk to us, and pretty soon Flip got comfortable with us being around them. He even let us smoke whatever we wanted, but the more drugs

that moved through there, the more paranoid he got. He put bars on all the windows and installed a TV camera and a remote controlled pull-down gate. When people rang the bell, he'd get his gun and scan the screen until he recognized them before he'd open the gate.

We thought we were pretty cool being trusted in such an outfit. Some of those Jamaican guys really looked rugged, the kind you wouldn't ever want to mess with, but there we were helping them unload their drugs, divide it up, and send it out.

One day this guy named Mr. XXX showed up. I don't know why he had three X's in his name, but he wasn't the kind of guy you could ask, either. Everyone made way for him, because he was the big boss. He spoke with a deep, accented voice, and never raised it or sounded upset. Strangely enough, he talked to Derrick and me about the marijuana, and that was the first time I'd ever heard anyone defending it as being a good thing—a "sacred thing," he called it. I guess that was because he was a Rastafarian.

Things had been so bad living with Charles and Mom that we never wanted to go back there, so we stayed at the studio for a time and then switched up and stayed at our older brother Rickie's house. Rickie was a criminal, but he had a nice place with all kinds of expensive furniture. As decorations, he displayed his large collection of fancy wines and liquors on the shelves behind the bar in the den. But when he was out, Derrick and I opened them, drank half, and then refilled the bottles with water. Rickie always left

cash lying around, and we stole it, too, along with his clothes. We just helped ourselves to anything he had.

Sometimes he caught us—especially with the clothes—and we'd tell him we were sorry, but we just didn't have anything to wear that morning. He never knew how much money he had around, so when he accused us of taking it, we just lied about it. Even though he couldn't be specific, he knew and got flaming mad. "That's it! I've had it with you guys. I tried to help you out, and you ripped me off. You're out!"

"But Rickie, where we gonna go?"

"That's your problem. You should have thought about that before you took advantage of me. I'm washing my hands of you. You can sleep in a ditch as far as I'm concerned. Why don't you go back to the studio? Seems like you and Flip are boys, stabbin' people in the back—like he did Vince—when they try to do you a good turn."

So Derrick and I went back to the studio, and Flip made us an offer to run the local drugs for him. "It'll put a couple thousand bucks in your pocket each week. You'll be working out of here, risk free."

It was tempting, and if that offer had come to us a little later, we'd probably have taken him up on it. But at that time, we felt in over our heads. Lots of drugs, big bucks, working for the Jamaican mafia—what a way to get ourselves killed! So we said no. Surprisingly, Flip was cool with that and let us stay in the studio anyway, working on our raps. But suddenly, he announced he was closing the

place down and going back to Philadelphia to work with his brother who was an even bigger drug dealer.

Where would we go? The school year was about to start, and even though Derrick was through with school, I was willing to give it another try, mostly because that was what every kid my age did. High school might be different, maybe I could get into sports, and that's where the girls were! But there was no way I could go to school and stay with Mom and Charles. Derrick and I couldn't even live with them in the summer when we could keep ourselves high and out of their way out by the pool. Besides Clairmont Lodge was in De Kalb County, and I might have trouble registering for school there because I'd been attending schools in Gwinnett County.

I called Dad and asked if I could come see him. He and my Uncle Kenny had recently moved into a new apartment in the Four Seasons complex, just across the De Kalb/Gwinnett County line on Dawson Boulevard, which at that point paralleled I-85.

Four Seasons was the biggest apartment complex I'd ever seen, woven in among the woods at the end of a very long drive called "Jerry Way." I finally found Dad's apartment, and it was a nice one—a couple of bedrooms, living room, kitchen—and modern. I explained that the only way I could be sure of getting into high school was to live in Gwinnett County, which he just barely did, so could I maybe live with him for a while.

He scowled at me. "You nearly flunked out last year." "Yeah, but I'm gonna do better this year."

His scowl deepened. “You’d have to pay some rent.”

“I could get a job,” is what I said, but it fried me inside. Why wasn’t he willing to put a roof over the head of his own son? Wasn’t that the responsibility of every parent?

He thought about my response a few moments. “What about Derrick?”

“I’m sure he’d like to live with you, too. You know we can’t live with that drunk Mom’s shacked up with. Know what I’m sayin’? We nearly killed each other. In fact, I’m seriously afraid Derrick might just do that someday.” Not to mention what I might do.

“All right,” Dad said. “We’ll give it a try, but if it doesn’t work out …” He jerked his thumb over his shoulder. “Oh, one other thing. I got my own life now, so you guys have to respect that, know what I’m sayin’?”

Yeah, but he wasn’t talking about Uncle Kenny. He probably meant he would be having “friends” over and would want us to clear out. But we were desperate, so I agreed.

* * * *

I started my freshman year at Meadowcreek High School with the same attitudes, habits, and rage as I’d ended the eighth grade. But Meadowcreek was the “home of the Mighty Mustangs,” so I tried out for football because I thought I was pretty good and dreamed—like a lot of young guys—of becoming a professional football player someday.

No sweat … I'd make the JV team, then go on to Varsity and be on my way. Of course, there were academic requirements to participate in sports, but I knew I could meet them if I wanted to.

However, even before the season got underway I blew out my knee, and another of my dreams shattered. It hit me hard: What was the use? As far as I was concerned, I knew only one other way of becoming a big man on campus: selling drugs.

Derrick and I started representing the Bloods, a gang out of Los Angeles. There were already some Crips established in our area, but not many organized Bloods, so there was no way to be formally jumped in, but we started wearing red— red Chuck Taylors, red T-shirt or jacket, red cap to the left, red left shoelace— throwing down hand signs. We went all out, and everyone knew who we were down for. But I also started carrying a white sock. If I left it hanging out of my pocket, it meant I had weed for sale. If not, then I didn't have any. It made me very popular— or so I thought—and it got me far more spending money than cleaning bowling alleys.

At the end of the long drive coming out of Four Seasons where we were staying with our dad was a small strip mall right along Dawson Boulevard. It included a Circle-K convenience store and gas station, a nightclub called Temptations, and a small Laundromat. We'd wait there for the bus, and it proved to be the best time to conduct "business." Derrick came with me even though he wasn't going to school, and no one bothered us. Before long the

word spread that we had weed, and older kids from other neighborhoods drove by in cars to buy a bag. Then they began asking if we had crack or a little white. With the connections we'd made, it was possible for us to get anything they wanted, and pretty soon we were raking in the dough.

We didn't need a job. We always paid what Dad demanded, though we never made it easy for him to collect.

Because we were representing the Bloods so strongly, a guy approached us who was also sporting lots of red.

We nodded at each other, and Derrick said, "Who you rep?"

"Just came down from Chicago 'cause they were telling me I couldn't be a Blood up there. Had to be a Vice Lord. But I'm a Blood, a Blood for life, know what I'm sayin'?"

"SOO WOO, man. SOO WOO. So are we."

His name was Charles, so Charles from Chicago became Chachi, and we got tight. We were glad to have him, too, because already other guys were moving in, trying to set up business on our block. I started missing school more and more to maintain our claim to the trap.

But the girls—at least the ones who interested me—were all in school, so I showed up most of the time. Trisha Baker was one such person. She was a really great girl, and she believed in me despite everything. She overlooked my flaws and all the trouble I got into because she saw something

good in me, and she kept expecting better from me. She grabbed my report card and said, “Ah Damien, I know you can do better than that. Look, I’ll help you study tonight. Okay?” She was one of the best people I’d ever met. She did great in school—no drugs, no fighting, no sex, no nothing. Of course, since she wouldn’t have sex with me, I was ready to sleep around with whoever would, but she didn’t tolerate that, either. I ended up trying to live up to her standards and respecting her for it.

I know there’s a problem when good girls take it upon themselves to try saving bad boys, but in this case it worked … at least to some degree. But it was hard. My life was becoming more and more fragmented: On one hand I was in school, but I was also dealing drugs and gangbanging. I was living with my gay father, while my crazy mother lived with a drunk who hated us. On the other side, my brother and I thought nothing of shoplifting and stealing on a regular basis, not to mention our increased involvement with serious criminals. By this time, Derrick and I both owned guns that we carried much of the time.

My ulcers were merely the physical symptom of how torn up I was inside.

Trisha brought a degree of peace to that turmoil. Whenever things at school or home or on the block brought me to the brink of snapping, I’d call her, and she would calm me down. Sometimes she spent two or three hours listening to my angry heart unwind until I could breathe again. But academically I was too scattered to recover. I blew off the

whole year, and passed only one class: language arts … just barely.

At the end of the year, in spite of Trisha's encouragement, I decided I wasn't going back to school anymore, just couldn't see the point in it. It was nothing more than a place of further aggravation and tension for me, and what was I getting out of it? Nothing!

* * * *

That summer I made a really stupid mistake. As important as Trisha had been to me, once school let out, I gave her a hug and a kiss and because she didn't live in the area, I promised, "I'll see you over the summer." I called her once during the first week of vacation, and we had a silly argument, so I didn't call her again—not because I didn't like her but because I didn't want her to find out what was happening to me. She had such high hopes for me, and I seemed to be failing on every front. I guess I felt embarrassed—embarrassed about the drugs, the gangbanging, the stealing and lying, and all the craziness of my family.

That craziness got even more bizarre the night Derrick and I came home from the trap and found Mom and Charles and our sister, Rose, in Dad's kitchen eating Chinese carryout. I didn't even say anything to them but marched right into Dad's room. "What are they doing here?"

He shrugged and shook his head.

"What are they doing here?" I demanded.

“Don’t be talkin’ to me like that, like this was your place, or somethin’. I’m the one who let you stay here, ain’t I? You’re the one always complainin’ that I don’t take care of you. Well, Rose is back … and she’s pregnant. So I couldn’t just leave her out on the street.” He turned back to the TV as though the conversation was over. But I stood there until he finally said, “Look, it’s only for one night. Your mom’s between places. They can’t move into their new place until tomorrow.” He threw up his hands. “What was I supposed to do? The girl’s pregnant, okay?”

I slammed the door as I went out and headed for the back room where Derrick and I slept on an old futon on the floor. Uncle Kenny usually slept in the living room. Dad had his bedroom, and I sure wasn’t gonna give up our room, not even for one night, not even if Rose was pregnant. What happened to that boyfriend of hers, anyway?

Caught the curse,
Fast money, that’s the birth!
Of crooks and thieves,
Gloves pulled above the sleeves,
Switch the spring,
To winter with my lyrical theme.
The criminal screams,
“Get money with the chemical beans!”
Then switch the routine,
Leave Niggaz askin’, “What did he mean?”
We enter da stage, you better off just
layin’ in flames,
We kick it insane,
Then leave a Nigga wetter than rain.
It’s some of them thangs
That don’t change, remain the same.
And stashed away,
The memories of yesterday.

CHAPTER TEN

ONE NIGHT turned into two, then a week, then a month—seven of us in that tiny apartment, arguing over every inch of space and every bite of food in the refrigerator … when there was any. The only thing that lowered the volume was when we were all too stoned on weed and alcohol to care.

Uncle Kenny was the first to go. Then one day, Dad packed his few belongings and drove off. Even though his name was on the lease, he was already a couple of months behind in the rent and refused to pay more.

Derrick and I might have been able to pay the rent ourselves from our drug money, but we hadn't been saving it. In fact, we were nearly broke. But even if we had the money, there was no way we were going to pay for Charles and Mom. So … we were all evicted again—locks changed, everything tossed out of the house, sitting in a pile by the dumpster.

We were homeless … again, but I guess misery loves company, because we ended up going with Mom and Charles to search for a new place to live. What we found was a room in a Motel Six.

What a disaster!

We'd only been there a couple of weeks when I got up one morning about eleven o'clock and started ironing some

clothes. That's when Charles started in on me. "So, you gonna look for a job today?"

"Maybe, maybe not." It was really time for Derrick and me to get back over to the trap and start making some money.

"Yeah, probably not," he sneered, " 'cause y'all don't do nothing but go out there and smoke dope. You nothin' but a couple weedheads."

"Yeah, and you're a sloppy drunk! Look man, you better leave it alone 'cause I'm not in the mood for this right now."

He started to rise from his chair. "I don't care what mood you in. You don't talk to me that way. You're in my house and your momma is my woman and I'm …" He melted back into the chair but kept ranting until I was ready to explode.

"One more word, Charles, just one more word, and you're gonna be sorry!"

He was drunk already that early in the day, and he gave me that one more word. I kicked over the ironing board and came at him with the hot iron in my hand, screaming at the top of my lungs. "I'm gonna brand you good, man! I'm gonna iron your face into the floor. Now, just shut up!" I threw the hot iron at him. Luckily, it missed.

He shut up and stalked into the bathroom. But a few minutes later, he came out steaming. "No! That's it! You boys are outta my house. I'm calling the police."

"Call 'em, Charles. I don't care. I can't stand to stay here anyway!"

He picked up the phone, but Mom intervened. “Don’t do it, Charles. Please don’t you call the police on my sons.”

He rolled his eyes and then glared at her. “Listen! Either they go, or you go!”

She didn’t move.

Derrick had joined the fray by then. “Come on, Damien.

We don’t need this. Let’s get out of here.” So we packed our few belongings in a duffle bag and left.

Once outside, it hit us—we were really homeless. Not knowing what to do, we walked to our brother Rickie’s place. At first, he wouldn’t let us in, but he finally said, “Okay, just one night, but then you gotta find something of your own.”

Well, we didn’t, but he was firm. After the second night, he loaded us in his car and drove us to our dad’s new place.

It was a terrible day, pouring down rain.

* * * *

It was still pouring rain when Rickie dropped Derrick and me at our dad’s apartment. We were mad that Rickie had kicked us out, and with the hard rain, we probably pounded extra hard on Dad’s door.

We waited … heard a little movement inside and knocked again.

Finally, Dad opened the door a few inches and stood there with a dead-pan look on his face. “Yeah, whadda ya want?”

“In!” we responded in unison.

He looked down and shook his head.

“What? Come on, Dad,” I said. “Rickie says we can’t stay with him anymore, so we’re out. And you know we can’t stay with Mom, not with that Charles dude still there. They’re holed up in the Motel Six, and there’s no room.”

Dad looked up at the sky and winced as if a few drops of rain had splattered in his eyes. “That’s tough.”

Derrick lunged at the door, crashing into it, but it didn’t budge. We hadn’t noticed that the safety chain was still connected.

“Hey, easy there. You think you’re gonna tear this place up?”

“No,” I said, trying to be the peacemaker. “But where we gonna go?”

Dad shook his head and looked back and forth as though there might be some options out in the parking lot. “Well,” he shrugged, “I don’t know what you gonna do, but you can’t stay with me.”

“Hey, how come? Can’t you see it’s raining out here?” “’Cause I got a life, too, ya know.”

Yeah, we knew. He probably had some guy in there with him right then. I saw Derrick growing more angry, but I was feeling desperate and didn't want to make things worse or burn any bridges behind us … as if I hadn't been doing that myself nearly every place I went.

I pushed Derrick to the side. "Okay, okay, Dad. Look, if you ain't gonna let us in right now, can you at least give us a few bucks to get something to eat? So we can get in outta this rain?"

"Hold on." He pushed the door closed, and I heard the lock flip immediately. Derrick and I looked at each other unable to believe what was happening as rain ran down our faces. A minute or two later he came back, unlocked the door, and opened it … again, just a crack, guaranteed by the security chain. "All I got is a twenty, and you dang sure ain't getting' that." He shrugged again—it was getting to be his habit. "Sorry, but there ain't nothing I can do for you." He slammed the door in our faces and locked it.

* * * *

It was a long hike—nearly three miles in a cold drizzle—from where Dad lived all the way back to the Circle-K on Dawson Boulevard where we sold drugs. We had no money for the bus, so we were soaked and frozen by the time we got there. We hadn't been at the trap in a couple weeks because of being evicted, staying at the Motel Six, and then crashing at Rickie's. But at this point, that was the only place we knew to go where we might find some old friends. But because we hadn't been dealing, we had no money. We didn't even have a slab to get started again. And who knew

how things might’ve changed while we were gone? In a drug spot, a lot can change in a few weeks.

When we got to the strip mall, no one was around. Nobody working the trap? What was that about? What had happened? Had there been a big bust? Had the cops shut it down? Had everyone we might have crashed with been arrested? Suddenly, we realized our situation was desperate. We were truly homeless—just like those bums panhandling outside the bus depot or dredging for handouts in Underground Atlanta. We’d sunk to the bottom of the bottom. How’d we get there?

Shivering, we ducked into the Circle-K and hung out for a while just to get warm. The clerk on duty knew we were going to steal stuff from him—we always had in the past—but what could he do? After a while, we pocketed a couple cherry pies and some beer and went outside to stand under the overhang next to the refrigerators where they sold bags of ice. The clerk saw us through the front window, standing there drinking his beer and eating his pies, but he couldn’t call the cops. We’d be done before they came, and once the cops were gone, we’d still be there and he’d have to face us as the guy who’d called them.

After a while, the rain stopped, and just as it started getting dark, some of the old crew began showing up, slipping in from here and there like the shadows of the dying day. “Hey man, how you doin?” we said to Omar, one of the first guys we’d known at the trap.

“Yo, Damien, Derrick. Wassup? Where y’all been keepin’ yourselves?”

“’Round. Actually, we been staying with our dad”—we lied—“way down on Memorial Drive. But, hey, any chance of crashing at your place tonight? It’s a long way back down there.”

“Oh, sure, man. Any time.”

However, when we had to beg and borrow some dope for a slab to get back into business, Omar figured out we were destitute. Suddenly he flipped and did a number on us, someone we really thought was a friend. “Hey man, you know, I forgot, but tonight ain’t such a good time for you guys to come over. I think my mom’s got a bunch of her women friends comin’ in. It ain’t gonna work out. Know what I’m sayin’?”

Yeah, we understood, and by the time the same thing happened with two or three other guys, we knew who weren’t our friends anymore. I divided the twenty-slab I’d borrowed and sold the cocaine, repaid the guy I’d borrowed it from and bought some more. Before the night was over, Derrick and I had over a hundred bucks between us, but we still didn’t have a place to stay.

It was nearly morning, and most of the other guys had drifted away, when a car pulled up to the Circle-K and let out a scantily-dressed, shapely woman, not much older than Derrick. We knew her from when we lived at Four Seasons, a stripper who worked at a club a couple miles away.

“Hey, Star, how you doin’?”

“Oh, I’m good. I’m good.” But Star didn’t look good. She looked as if someone had beaten her up. “Where you guys been? Haven’t seen you around here for a while.”

“Yeah, we were staying with …” I decided to let it all hang out. What could it hurt? “… our mom. Actually, she’s living with this truck driver, and he won’t let us stay there anymore, and our dad’s a faggot, so he won’t let us live with him, either. We actually got no place to stay.” We started walking with her as she went down the lane toward Four

Seasons. “Hey, you think we could hang out at your place for a while … just ’til we got on our feet again? We can pay. How ’bout twenty bucks a night? Whadda ya say, Star. You know we’re good for it.”

She walked on in silence for another thirty yards or so, wobbling in her spike heels and tight little mini-skirt without looking at either one of us. Finally, she said, “They really kicked you out, uh?”

“More like our old man wouldn’t let us in even when it was raining like Noah’s flood,” snarled Derrick, cutting loose with a string of curses and foul names for our father.

“All right. You can stay with me for a week. Twenty bucks a night and no trouble. Understand? I got my mom living with me, and she needs her rest. So no noise! No carryin’ on. No one else up in the apartment, ever! Got that?”

“No problem. No problem, Star. You won’t know we’re there. We’ll slip in and out as quiet as can be. Promise.”

We thought she was going to give us an extra bedroom to sleep in or at least let us sleep on her fold-out couch or a futon on the floor. But when we got up to her place, she took us out back and threw a mat down on the tiny patio. “Here, you guys can sleep here. At least the cops won’t pick you up.” The patio was still damp from the rain, and we felt like a couple of dogs put outside for the night. But we stayed there with Star because we had no place else to go. We never did see her mom, but whenever she brought a john home, she’d lock us out and close the drapes, and we couldn’t even come in to use the bathroom or get a drink of water until he’d gone.

Our “week” stretched into a month, and then one morning we woke up—after being locked out the night before—to discover the patio door was open a few inches. We tiptoed in and were making some toast when a big dude we’d seen at Temptations a couple of times came staggering out of her bedroom rubbing his eyes and stretching. “What you blankety-blanks doing here?” He inserted some choice, degrading terms, accusing us of having incest with our mother.

“Nothin’. Didn’t Star tell you we live here?”

“Like her little brothers, huh? No way. You probably broke in. You come in through that patio door?”

“We like sleepin’ out there when the nights are nice.”

He laughed and went back into the bedroom. We thought that was the end of it until he came out a few minutes later

with his clothes on and digging in Star's purse, dumping all her stuff on the coffee table and pocketing her cash.

"Hey man, you can't do that!"

"Does it look like there's anything around here that I can't do? What's the matter witchu? You blind or somethin'?"

In a minute, he was out the door. Derrick and I shook our heads, muttering to each other about how mad Star was going to be when she found out the jerk had robbed her. Even though she made us sleep on the porch, we still tried to have a good spirit about it and felt terrible that we hadn't been able to stop the guy.

We didn't see Star until later that afternoon. Business was slow at the trap, so we were taking a break playing pool in Temptations when Star burst in, yelling, "I can't believe you two! I help you out! I let you into my house! And this is how you do me! You steal from my bag?"

"No, no, Star! We never took nothin' from you. It was that __"

"Oh, yes you did, you cheap liars! I had over two hundred dollars in here when I left this morning. You're dumb, too. Think I can't see my place has been tossed? What's the matter with you? You nothin' but a couple of ingrate crackheads, that's what! Got no morals at all! That's what those drugs will do to you. Is that how your mama raised you?"

I held up both hands, palms out and stepped toward her. “Now, Star, calm down. We didn’t take nothin’ from you. Not a dime.”

She swung her purse at me and would have clobbered me if I hadn’t ducked. At that moment, the owner of Temptations kicked us all out.

As we tumbled out the door, Star continued swinging her purse at us and yelling, “You know you did it. Y’all just liars. I’m gonna get someone to take care of you both. You never shoulda messed with me. You messed with the wrong person if you thought you could steal from me!”

That night we slept outside on a phone transformer box, high enough to get us up off the ground so no critters could get us—we hoped—but it was hard trying to sleep on nothing but a hard metal box with an incessant buzzing sound inside it.

I broke today. Fell apart and caught the shakes.
Ulcer, aches, burn like my flesh done baked.
Beg for grace. The stress got it
Hard to make the closest date,
To March 5, chose to take.
Another route,
Serve the butta out,
Owes the state.
Push the weight,
Then handle all the bills that’s late.
’Cause ain’t nobody trying to help a brotha liven this way.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

SOMEHOW, FACING the fact that we were really homeless tipped the scale and both Derrick and I kind of flipped out. Before this we'd been selling weed and cocaine as our way to get cash, a way to be the big men on the block, provide a service, be cool. We didn't think of ourselves as predatory "dope dealers." But all that changed. We became the lowdown real deal and owned that identity, stinging our suppliers whenever we could, cheating any addict too smashed to know what was happening.

For a while, we slept on park benches or in the sheds next to swimming pools. Sometimes we broke into the clubhouses of the apartments complexes and slept there, using the restrooms and showers to clean up before any staff arrived the next morning. That worked out pretty well, except when you're working the trap until two or three in the morning, you don't feel like getting up and out before seven a.m. We needed something better.

That's when we noticed that our old apartment in Four Seasons was still vacant. The way we figured it, the management never should've put us out in the first place, so we broke in and became squatters. Now we had a place to bring girls and party. And more and more, girls were showing up at the trap, too. They got a thrill hanging around the "bad" boys, and we obliged. The trap was becoming huge, gangsters everywhere you turned, and we were getting a rep as the hottest drug spot in the area. But the

attention brought its own problems—other gangs: Mexican gangs, Cambodian gangs, the Crips and some other Folks, few Vice Lords, and even Four Corner Hustlers.

Gangs across the country are roughly divided into two main groups—the People and the Folks. Before this we'd had kind of a truce between the People and the Folks in that area of Atlanta, live and let live for the sake of business, you might say. But now tensions were building. Because Derrick and I, representing the Bloods, had pretty much established the trap on Dawson Boulevard, everyone knew the People were in charge. But when some new Folks showed up, they started challenging us.

One day we Bloods were all out there in our red when a guy named Bud whom Derrick had known him in school came driving up in his car. He and Derrick had never gotten along, and the guy was a Folk and thought he had respect, but he didn't really have any. Anyway, Bud got out of his car and came swaggering up to Derrick, his shoulders rolling as he added a fake limp. "So hey, wassup Derrick?"

Derrick shrugged. "Yeah, wassup Bud?"

"What's all this crap?" He waved his hand around the trap. "I mean I heard y'all making some noise up in here."

Derrick looked away. "Yeah, well, sometimes you gotta be careful about what you hear. Know what I'm sayin'?"

"Yeah, but, wassup with all this red you got on? Wassup with the red, man?"

Now nobody else would have been talking to Derrick that way, not even the other Folks we were cool with. But Bud pressed on. “Like, wassup with this?” And he grabbed the sleeve of Derrick’s T-shirt and gave it a yank.

Three of us Bloods were standing right there in red: Derrick and me and Chachi, our friend from Chicago. Somehow, Derrick remained cool. “You know what it is.”

“What? Y’all some kind of Bloods or something?”

Still Derrick held on. All he did was throw up the sign for the Piru Bloods.

“Uh, oh, so that’s what it is, is it?”

“Look,” Derrick said, “all we’re doin’ around here is tryin’ to make a little cash, know what I’m sayin’? But you’re making this spot too hot. So, why don’t you go some place else?”

Woo! That’s all Bud was waiting for. “Oh, you think this is your block? What’s with this talk, ‘we’? You think you own this?”

“Man, I don’t think you know who you’re talking to! Yeah, this is our block! And we’re not going nowhere!”

“Oh yeah?” Bud got right up in Derrick’s face just as Jay, another guy, stepped up. He had recently come from the Wild Hundreds area on Chicago’s south side, or as Jay called it, the “Wild Hunneds.”

“Hey, hey, hey! Calm down, Bud. Calm down, now. That’s no way to be.”

Jay was himself a Folk with some serious rank and already had a lot of respect in Atlanta, and he’d seen us in a fight before. We didn’t mind having him around. He put his hand on Bud’s shoulder like he was kin or something. “Listen, Bud. I’m tellin’ you. You don’t want none of these brothas here. I’m just tellin’ you, you don’t want to mess with the twins. You hear?” A lot of guys called us the twins because we looked so much alike, even though Derrick was three years older.

Bud yanked his shoulder away from Jay, took a step back, and gave us all a sneer. “Look, tell you what, I’m gonna come back at eight o’clock tonight, and you better not be here on this block, ’cause if you are, you know what’s gonna happen!”

I got into it then. “Oh yeah? Well, you just come on,

Bud, and you’ll see what’s gonna happen. Bring it on, man. Bring it on.”

The deal was, we knew if Bud came back, he’d come packin’ some serious heat. He wouldn’t come with just his mouth. Not long before eight, I said to Derrick, “You know if we go up there, somebody’s gonna die, don’t ya?”

“Ain’t got no choice.” And we didn’t think we did. So we strapped on—me the Dirty Harry .357 magnum, Derrick a .9 mm that held thirteen shots and Chachi his favorite .38 snub-nose—and walked over to the trap. Chachi liked that

little .38 because he had some hollow-point bullets for it that had poison in them, sealed with wax. Even a nick could take a guy out if they got the poison in them. We stood right on the corner outside the Circle-K where everyone could see us. We all hoped Bud wouldn't show, but we knew he had to, just like we had to show up.

At about three minutes past eight, Bud's car came rolling through. He circled around in the parking lot a couple times, then came to a stop not far from us. He got out and looked hard at us but didn't say anything. After a moment, he walked over and talked to some other Folk I didn't even know. We just stood there, staring, feeling the heavy steel in our pockets, not knowing or trusting what would go down.

Then Bud got back in his car and drove away. I don't think we ever saw him again.

* * * *

But that incident with Bud made us think we needed more firepower. What if some rivals really tried to drive us off our block? It wasn't long before we collected an AK-47, a sawed-off pump shotgun, and a whole trunk full of guns. We started packing all the time after that because it was getting wild out there, and the cops were also starting to pay too much attention. Our trap at the Circle-K was on the corner of Dawson Boulevard and Jerry Way, the access road back into Four Seasons. But right across Jerry Way from the Circle-K was another housing development called Ridgecrest. These apartments were cheap units in two-story long houses, situated at different angles on property that was somewhat higher ground than our trap. So some of us would cross the

street and climb up the little bank where we could stand and oversee the Circle-K, Temptations, and the whole strip mall. Wannabees down in the parking lot of the Circle-K took orders from the addicts or rich kids who came to buy dope. They'd signal to us, and if everything was clear, we'd deliver. But if there was any sign of the cops, we'd flee back through that housing project. There was no way the cops could get close before we were gone.

But behind the Circle-K was a little wooded hill, and more than once some rivals snuck in there and started shooting at us, either when we were down in the parking lot or across the road in the bushes of the housing project. So we needed protection.

A guy who worked as a cook at Temptations—he was actually La Raza, part of the Folk nation, but we got along okay—came out of Temptations in broad daylight one day just to have a smoke, and a carload of Brown Side Locos we'd never seen before came driving through the lot and sprayed him with bullets. The ambulance took him to the hospital, but he never came back to work. I don't even know if he made it or not.

Of course with all this action, the police started getting more and more interested in us. It wasn't easy for them to catch any of us because we had advance notice from our lookouts and position. One day Derrick, Chachi, and I were working the trap along with a guy they called Too Raw. Too Raw was really ghetto, didn't shower much, and had a full grill of gold teeth. We were across the road up behind the bushes that surrounded Ridgecrest where we could oversee

everything that went down around Circle-K. When we noticed a guy drive in and begin talking to our shorties. We didn't recognize him for what he was even when he began yelling at us. "What y'all doin' over there? You stay put. I want to come talk to you."

Too Raw yelled back, "What's it to you? Get outta here. You don't belong around here!"

"What? Who said that? Freeze! I'm a police officer!" The guy pulled out his badge. "Everybody freeze! I'm comin' up there."

Then that fool Too Raw pulled out a gun and began firing at the cop! Bang! Bang! Bang!

The cop ducked behind his car, opened the door, and radioed for backup. Less than five minutes later, over twenty cop cars wheeled into that parking lot, sirens blazing.

We took off back through the Ridgecrest apartment buildings, running as fast as we could until we came to another housing development where we holed up in a vacant apartment. We hid out there for a couple hours, then drifted back toward the Circle-K by different routes. I even walked right up to one of the cops—not the one who'd yelled at us; he'd left by then—and said, "What's going on out here, officer?"

He glanced at me like I was ten years old. "Ah, some guys shot at one of our officers. But we're gonna get 'em! We're

gonna get ’em! I guarontee it!” He pronounced guarantee like he was tryin’ to be some kind of a Cajun.

Suddenly it seemed that instead of being the big shots everybody came to and looked up to, we had to watch our backs from every angle—other gangs, other drug dealers, and now the cops. And there was always the risk of an ambush.

One day we heard about a party some guys were throwing at a park called Lucky Shoals. Several of us said, “Hey, why not? Let’s go see what’s poppin’.” So four of us—my homie Jamal, Derrick, Chachi, and I—piled into a car and drove to the park. Lucky Shoals wasn’t very developed at this time, a wooded area with some picnic spaces, a small pavilion, and some open fields where people could play softball or whatever. But civilians usually cleared out before dark. The party was up on a little hill in a clearing, and we had to drive way in along a winding road to get there.

No sooner had we come over the last little crest into the clearing than we realized that the whole party was “blue”—all Crips! Several other cars had pulled in, guys sitting in the back of lowrider pickups or leaning against fenders smokin’ weed, and the way they were parked among the trees, there was no way for us to quickly turn around and get out of there. Oh, man. We’d really stepped in it!

Jamal was driving, and he just shut off the engine. My heart was racing. I looked at Derrick, and he looked at me. I think we both thought this was it. We were dead! Then we both looked at Jamal, because he was a Folk even though he was cool with us People. Jamal just shrugged and opened

the door very slowly and got out. We got out, too. Even if this was it, we'd face it with pride.

It was dusk and kind of dark, but when the Crips looked over to see who had arrived, we could see the shock on their faces that all of us except Jamal wore red. Everyone was silent, and then their leader—a guy named Lucky from Little Rock, Arkansas—came around from behind his SUV and started to approach.

We didn't move. There wasn't any place for us to go or anything we could do.

When Lucky got to the door of his ride, and he opened it wide so we could see what was lying on the seat. We could see a Tech-9 with what looked like a 36-round clip in it. Lucky picked it up and started playing with the gun while he stared at us.

For some reason, none of us were armed, though somewhere in our car we had that stubby .38—maybe in the glove compartment,—but what was a .38 against a Tech-9? And who knew how much other heat the rest of those Crips were packing?

Finally, the Crip leader put it down. "So wassup with all this red? I see you bangin' your hats to the left." He looked us up and down. "You know this 501 Crips up in here." He picked up his Tech-9 again.

"Chill out, Lucky." Jamal took a step forward. "These here are my Folks."

“Folks? I don’t care if they yo mama. Folk don’t bang to the left. Crips don’t wear red. What you bringin’ them up in here for?” He looked at Derrick. “What set you claim?”

“Piru.” I’m sure he wanted to be bold, but his voice was rather quiet and humble sounding. Still, all of us—all except Jamal, of course—threw up the Piru sign.

“Oh really? So this is what Piru look like?” he sneered. Slowly Lucky turned away and walked over to his other boys, talking with them in low, mumbling voices we couldn’t hear.

“Hey, man,” Derrick whispered, “let’s get outta here now, while we can.”

Quickly, but trying not to pee in our pants, we got back in the car and backed away to a point in the road where we could turn around. Then Jamal hit the accelerator, leaving dust and rubber the whole way.

With all this craziness going on, I knew I shoulda been dead … more than once. But it also crossed my mind that it was only God who had spared my life.

But why?

Thieves proceed to steal the gold.
Jack the Rolls, chop it up and fix the doors
on ya house then tow the probe.
Get the Lincoln on them vogues.
Now you ballin’, never fallin’ puttin’
power up ya’ll nose.
But Dee don’t touch the snoit.
Just hit the weed then save me shorts
on that B.D.
Peachy smoke, hit my throat.
Like Dewberry, it’s scary how she keep me
broke.
Pour the rum and mix the Coke,
Mango nectar smooth the drink.
On the beach endure the heat while
swiggin’ liquor,
Soak ya feet in salty water. Ease your
mind, but need to
eat ’fore beams of sun and captain meet.
I seen my Niggaz pop-locken to Spanish
beats.
And poor knockin’ for candy treats,
And hoe hoppin’ for something deep on
Liberty Street.

CHAPTER TWELVE

THE COPS gave up trying to catch us by sending a couple cruisers around when we were doing business. As many as thirty dealers operated at the Circle-K on Dawson, and big money changed hands. But as soon as the alarm went out, we scattered. The cops didn't have a chance because we knew every twist and turn through the neighborhood and woods while they were all from outside. So they escalated their raids by sending in twenty to thirty cars—cops from both Gwinnett and De Kalb counties, since we were right on the border—backed up by helicopters to try and spot us from the air. But that didn't help much. There were too many trees and other places where we could keep out of sight.

This running and hiding became a thrill for us, because we were winning, and that made us all the bolder … until the day some of the guys fired off a few shots at the cops.

Stupid! Stupid! We should've known they wouldn't stand for that for a hot minute. The next day the police were back, but these weren't regular cops. They'd sent the Red Dog units, and they didn't play. Red Dogs were the militarytrained "Special Forces" of the local police, very aggressive and heavily armed. As far as they were concerned, anyone in the neighborhood who even looked suspicious was guilty.

When they roared in, Derrick and I didn't have any dope or weapons on us that day, so we didn't run. But a big black

dude charged us. I put my hands up and because of the wild-eyed look on his face, I started yelling, “I don’t have nothin’! I’m clean. I ain’t a part of this. I just came down to the store to get some soda.” But that didn’t even slow him down. He grabbed me and boom, threw me on the ground, grinding my face into the dirt.

“What you got on you? Where is it? You better tell me before I break your arm!”

“Nothin’, man! Nothin’! I ain’t got nothin’! Take it easy, man. You’re killin’ me!”

“You got no idea, you little dope boy. You gonna be in a world of hurt before I’m through with you if you don’t cough up your stash. Now where is it? Right NOW!”

“Ouch! Come on, man. I ain’t got nothing. Just frisk me if you want—”

“I don’t frisk! I just take. So give it!”

“Man, I’m tryin’ to tell you, I ain’t got nothing. Nothin’ at all!”

“Then, how ’bout if we go for a little ride.” He yanked me to my feet like I was a rag doll and held me by the collar. “We’re not goin’ to the police station, you know,” he sneered in my ear. “We’ll just cruise on down toward Macon. There’s this little road I know that goes off through the woods and ends at a slimy, green slough. Ain’t hardly nobody knows ’bout it. And for sure, ain’t nobody gonna find

you … or what’s left of you when the gaters get through with you.”

Gaters? There weren’t any alligators around Atlanta, but there were sometimes reports of the critters not that far south. His radio crackled, a call to assist with the arrest of someone else. At that moment the man threw me away so hard I stumbled over the curb and almost went down. He looked me up and down with hard eyes. “Listen, you turd. I can see what you are, so no more chuckin’ and jivin’. Understand? I will take you out. We’ll take all y’all out. So you better shut this trap down. Ya hear?”

Then he was gone.

I didn’t realize the arrest he’d been called to assist was for one of my partners who they’d caught with a big bag of crack. In a few days, we heard he’d gotten ten years. Ten years! And this guy didn’t even have any priors! We were dumbfounded. “Oh my God! They really ain’t playin’!”

Next, they showed up at the home of one of my crew and arrested him. We discovered they’d been videotaping us from a distance and building cases against us. One after another, they began picking us off. None of us were safe any longer.

Derrick and I abandoned the apartment we’d been crashing in and found another vacant one a little farther away. This time we didn’t tell anyone where we were living. Maybe there was some value in being homeless: The cops wouldn’t know where to go to pick us up … we hoped!

But as they began picking off the boys from our block, our infrastructure broke down, and outsiders began to swoop in like vultures picking the bones. Chachi was head- ing home one night when a guy stepped out from behind the bushes and put a gun to his head. “Down on the ground, sucker.” Once Chachi was thrown on the ground, the guy pressed the gun harder against the base of his skull. “No way, man. You turn your head and try and look at me, and I’ll blow it off! Now … very slowly, turn your pockets inside out. Everything!”

Chachi lost all his product and nearly three thousand bucks that night.

“Yeah, and he woulda pulled that trigger, too,” Chachi told us the next day. “It ain’t safe around here no more.”

But where else could we go? Maybe that’s why they called it a “trap.” You get caught in a cycle, and it seems as if there’s no way out. Still, we had to bring some order to the block.

* * * *

Toot Toot was only fifteen and he didn’t have any reason to bang or deal. His mother had a good job and a nice car, and they had a comfortable apartment, but somehow he just wanted to be a gangster. So he joined the GDs (Gangster Disciples) and started snorting cocaine. Even though he was a Folk, we were cool with him because he never disrespected us, and we never disrespected him.

But the cocaine made Toot Toot really crazy, and one day he got into an argument with a huge Mexican guy who was a Crip. It didn't matter that they were both Folk, Toot Toot started to talk trash to him until the guy punched him. Toot Toot's head popped back like he'd been kicked in the face by a mule, but that didn't slow him down. He just came back swinging. Of course, Toot Toot was no match for the big guy, but the Mexican was cautious, glancing over at us, obviously concerned that we might jump in, and by then Toot Toot was yelling, "Hey, man, give me some help here, huh? How 'bout it? Y'all going to sit there and let this happen?" Derrick held up both hands. "Man, this is your beef … between you and him."

"You handle your business," I added.

"Oh, so it's like that, huh?" Toot Toot was not being very successful dancing out of the guy's reach. "All right. If that's the way it is …" He reached down and grabbed an old Cisco wine bottle that had been kicking around. Holding the bottle by the neck, Toot Toot smashed it across the guy's head. Cisco bottles are heavy, thick glass, but the guy just stood there like the Terminator.

About five seconds later, though, the blood started gushing down his face like he was in a shower. And then he crumpled to the ground. They had to take the guy to the hospital, where he stayed for a couple of weeks to repair some serious damage.

But as soon as someone called the ambulance, we all had to clear out of the trap, and several of us headed across the street and up into the Ridgecrest apartment complex. Toot

Toot and a friend of his named Ricky came with us. But another Crip tagged along who'd been friends with the Mexican because he actually lived in one of the Ridgecrest apartments.

I don't know what started it off, but before we got to his apartment, Toot Toot got into it with him. At first they were just trash talking each other, the Crip ranking on Toot Toot for taking a bottle to his homeboy. But pretty soon the fists were flying, and this time Pretty Ricky jumped in to help out Toot Toot, who was again getting whipped.

As soon as that happened, the other guy broke away. "Hey, wassup with that? You can dish it out, but you can't take it in! Is that it? You gotta have help, huh? Well, I'll show you some help!" And ran up the stairs to his apartment. In a moment, he was screaming down the stairs, "All right, all right! Come on now. Come on up! Come now, homies!"

Derrick and I knew he had some guns up in there, and even though he was a Crip and we were Bloods, we waved Toot Toot and Ricky back and started up the stairs ourselves, one slow step at a time.

"Hey, man. This is Damien and Derrick. We're comin' up. You ain't got no beef with us, right? We're comin' on up. Okay?" That's when we heard two clicks and turned the corner to face the guy sitting at the top of the steps, his back to the door jam and a double-barreled shotgun cocked and pointing right at us.

Sounding like he had asthma or something, he panted, "You with them?"

“No man! We cool!” We wanted to fall back down the stairs out of his sight, but we raised our hands and tried to put on a pleasant face. “Everything’s cool, man. Just put that thing down.”

He shook his head, almost as if he was trying to clear out the cobwebs from too much booze. “Man, I don’t care! I don’t care anymore. I just don’t care! They’re going to try to jump me? Well, we’ll see! They’re gonna jump me, and now they’re gonna see. So come on up in here … right now!” he yelled for the other guys to hear.

We didn’t move a twitch, but in the background we suddenly heard footsteps. Sounded like several people, Boom! Boom! Boom! pounding up the steps fast and hard. “We’re coming! We’re coming!” Toot Toot and Ricky yelled. All I could imagine was that this would push that guy over the edge, and he’d pull both triggers for sure.

“No! Wait!” I yelled. “Don’t come up! Give us a minute here.”

The pounding up the stairs stopped, but I could see the guy with the shotgun hyperventilating, and I knew he was going to do it. “Move! Move! Move!” he hissed.

But there was nowhere for us to go. “No man! You don’t wanna do this. You’d go to jail, man! They’d ice you

’til you were as old as Stone Mountain. You don’t wanna do this.

Put it down, okay?”

Movement started again on the stairs behind us. Derrick turned. And looked down. “Freeze! Y’all better not come up these stairs, man. Stay! I said, STOP! Stop right there!”

“Forget it, man,” barked Ricky from below. “Look here …” and he held up his 9-mm. “He want some of this?” “You have no idea, man. Now just stay put.”

I supported Derrick. “Ricky, y’all stay down those stairs. Ya hear me? We ain’t jokin’ here. Just stay where you are.”

“Naw man. He wanna talk all that trash, well, he’s gonna eat a little of it. We’re coming up!” And he took a couple more steps.

“DON’T COME!” I screamed. “He’s got a double-barreled shotgun, and we’re right between you fools! He’ll blow all our heads off, so don’t come around that corner.”

“What?”

“He’s gonna blow our heads off. Now just stay down there!” The moments ticked by as slow as if we’d smoked three blunts. “He’s got it cocked, and it’s pointn’ right at me and Derrick. Now stay put!”

Finally, Ricky and the others backed down a little, but they were still talkin’ crap up at the guy.

“I’ll show you punks!” the Crip yelled. “Just come on up here, and I’ll show you!”

“Man, it’s all right. They’re goin’ back down. Everything’s cool. Now just put that thing down, okay?”

He let the end of the barrel drop a few inches. At least it wouldn’t be our heads he’d blow off, but we sure wouldn’t have any children if we lived to tell it if he pulled that trigger.

“Come on, now,” said Derrick. I’d never heard him use such a nice voice. “Come on, man. It’s over. All over. They backed off, okay?”

Slowly, the guy’s panting decreased to normal breathing, and we slowly went up the last few steps and approached him. The shotgun was no longer pointed at us, but the grip he had on that thing was so strong, it took us several minutes to soften it and get the gun out of his hands.

We went into his apartment and fell on the couch, so weak we couldn’t move for an hour. Both Derrick and I knew we shoulda been dead that day!

I’ve been tried by the spirit.
So much drama, got so tired couldn’t hear it.
In a minute, I could die from a bullet.
Be the victim, homicide to the fullest.
If it happened, I could cry but it wouldn’t
Rectify what the wine had influenced.
Drain the wine, shots fired at a hoodlum
Double time, blood supply gettin’ thinner.
’Cause a real killa bought it
And decided to pull it,
Mad Dog stealin’ minds of the chil’en.
See the signs of the times, snortin’ lines like it’s sugar.
Think it’s time we remembe … who supplies evil feelin’s.
It’s that Lucifer. He thrives on y’all’s sickness. …
Got me sinnin’, beggin’ God for forgiveness.
I’m a witness.

CHAPTER THIRDTEEN

TOOT TOOT had to go into hiding after that. There were days when lowriders filled with Mexican gangbangers cruised through the Circle-K, throwing down signs and calling for Toot Toot's blood. Sometimes when several carloads of them arrived at the same time, they'd get out, make a lot of noise, strutting around in their tank tops, all tattooed up, wearing Locs sunglasses, guns in hand … just daring us to make a move.

We didn't want a race war, so we stayed cool. Nevertheless, one day one of our homies was using the payphone, and I guess the Mexican dudes thought he was Toot Toot because they started shooting at him from out by the street. We all hit the ground and returned fire until they drove off.

That night, I couldn't sleep, and all the next day I was as jumpy as static on an old TV. Everywhere I turned, I started thinking someone was there looking to kill me. I didn't feel like going to the trap, but I had no choice. We couldn't stay in the vacant apartment where we squatted. The management might come through and catch us, so I walked up the road toward the Circle-K with Derrick. Pretty soon we hooked up with Chachi and "opened" for business, which was kind of slow, it being Tuesday, but I didn't care. I was so tired, that I lay down on the bench in front of Temptations and tried to get some sleep, but the sound of every car turning into the strip mall goosed me into a panic that an

assassin, some outraged rivals, or bloodthirsty cops were attacking us. Later that night as I stretched out on the ratty burntorange carpet in the vacant apartment, I hugged my "Dirty Harry" .357 magnum as if it were a teddy bear, hoping it might bring me some comfort. But I kept worrying that if I fell asleep, I might roll over on it and shoot myself.

The next day at the trap, a helicopter flew over, circled and came back, hovering as if it were spying on us. It wasn't a Gwinnett County sheriff chopper, but what if it carried some kind of cops … preparing to raid us again? When I told Derrick and Chachi they laughed at me, but I bugged them until they agreed to take a break and let the other guys "mind the store."

We went into the bathroom of the Circle-K and locked the door. I climbed up on the toilet stool, slid over the ceiling tile, and stashed our crack and money out of sight. As we left the store, we stole a forty-ounce bottle of malt liquor and "retired" to the bench in front of Temptations. By then, I'd been awake for over seventy-two hours straight. My insides shuddered like a car with an out-of-balance tire, and my mind buzzed like a flickering florescent light. I lit a blunt to try and calm down. We figured we could easily get rid of a couple personal blunts if the cops came. The Dirty Harry tucked in the back of my pants would be harder to explain—maybe I could drop it in the trashcan—but there was no way I was going to be caught without it if those Mexicans rolled in instead of the cops.

How did things get so out of wack? Maybe God was punishing me for being so cold hearted. I thought about

Celia’s father … I continued to feed him crack even though it was destroying him and she’d begged me to stop.

I flipped the butt of the smoked-out blunt toward the storm drain. “Hey, Chachi, you believe in God?”

He looked my way with a smirk. “Only god I know is ‘Mr. God Damn,’ but why would I ever believe in him? What’s he ever done for me?”

Derrick shook his head. “That ain’t right, man. You shouldn’t talk like that. That’s like blasphemin’. Something bad’ll happen to you.”

Chachi stood up and stepped out into the parking lot, raised his hands, looked up, and spun slowly around as if he were a radar screen. “Well, if He don’t like it, He can strike me right here, right now. Bring it on!” He whipped his arms up in the air like a linebacker calling for more noise from the fans.

I glanced up, not knowing whether to expect a bullet from that helicopter—which had flown off by then—or a bolt of lightening from heaven. “You just stay away from me, man. I don’t want none of that.” I watched him for a moment. “How come you don’t believe in God?”

He came back to the bench. Guess I wasn’t too worried about him being close. “Look,” said Chachi, “any God who would let my best friend get murdered when we were only nine years old ain’t one I’d want to believe in, even if He did exist.”

There wasn’t anything Derrick or I could say to that, so we all sat in silence, passing the forty-ounce back and forth. But I kept thinking: maybe everything was going wrong because we’d been doing so many wrong things and God was punishing us.

I leaned forward, elbows on my knees, chin in my hands. “You guys realize we’re everything they taught us in school not to be?”

“Whaddaya mean?”

“You know, those classes where they tell you not to steal or lie or sell drugs or rob people? Well, we’re all that and more. Know what I’m sayin’?”

Chachi slapped me on the back. “Yeah, so we’s bad! So what? Everybody does that stuff these days. It’s the only way to get ahead. You know if we like let up for even one hot minute, there’ll be Crips and GDs and Vice Lords and the Mexicans and the Cambodians all up in here tryin’ to take over our block.”

“Yeah,” said Derrick, “like most of them already think they runnin’ this trap.”

“I know, and that’s the problem,” I said. “There ain’t no getting’ ahead. This was our real estate, but now all Atlanta wants in on it.”

And it was true. There wasn’t no getting ahead in our business. Chachi might not believe in God, but somewhere along the way—in spite of my mom’s voodoo and my dad’s

hypocrisy—I'd picked up a belief in a righteous God. And right then I didn't think he was very happy with me.

"Hey, Damien!" Derrick slugged me in the shoulder. "Wake up, man. You zoned out there. Hey, man, it's your turn to go get us another forty-ounce. Okay?"

"Yeah, yeah. Whatever." I got up and headed toward the convenience store. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a green lowrider turn into the parking lot, throbbing with the beat of some Latin hip-hop. But I didn't pay any attention as I entered the Circle-K because I was still thinking about Celia and her old man, the guy whose life I was ruining.

I avoided looking at the clerk and headed to the back of the store for the beer. I had just opened the door to the refrigerator and was reaching for a bottle when one of the wannabees who were always hanging around the strip mall came running into the store and found me.

The kid looked up with wide eyes. "Hey man, you can't go back out there. Those Brown Side Locos are lookin' for you. They say they're gonna shoot you, and they look se- rious, man."

"So what?" Surely they were after Toot Toot and not me. Still, I instinctively reached back to be sure the big Dirty Harry was still tucked in my belt. I waved the kid off, slipped the forty-ounce into the pocket of my cargo pants, and started toward the door.

But the wannabee grabbed my arm. "You can't go out there. Derrick said to disappear."

“For real, man? Don’t be jackin’ me around, now. You gettin’ on my last nerve here, kid.”

“No B-S, man. I seen their guns.”

I shook my head, and pushed the kid toward the door while I turned and went into the back stock room. Tony, the manager, was in there moving some boxes around.

“What you want?”

“Gotta use your backdoor.” And I walked toward it.

“So you’re gonna steal my beer—” he pointed at my bulging pocket “—then you expect to use my backdoor ’cause you’re too lazy to walk around the outside. No way, man. Give me that beer or pay for it up front.”

I shook my head. “Look, man. Just let me cut through this one time.”

“Why should I?”

“’Cause some BSLs are out there saying they want to blow my head off. I don’t have time for this today, and you probably don’t want bullet holes through your front windows. Okay? So let me through.”

I pushed past him and went out the door, across the little drive where delivery trucks dropped off stuff for the store, and ducked through the hole in the fence that led into the woods.

Fifty yards into the woods I came to a large rock outcropping that overlooked a small clearing. I walked out onto the rock and sat down, letting my legs hang over the edge. When I looked up, I realized the sun shinning. Somehow, I hadn't even noticed what kind of a day it was. I opened the forty-ounce, chugged a few gulps, and lit up a blunt. The Dirty Harry was poking into my back, so I pulled it out and laid it on the rock beside me. It sure was shiny. I picked it up and hefted the weight of it. Now that was a piece!

I pointed it at a tree across the clearing, imagining wasting those BSLs back there who had it in for me and all my other enemies and the cops and my mother's boyfriend and my dad and everyone else who made my life miserable.

But why did everyone make my life so miserable? Why didn't anybody seem to care? Why didn't my family want me?

I recalled the last time someone had threatened to shoot me, just a couple of weeks earlier. Derrick and I'd been chased out of a vacant apartment and he'd gone over to some girl's place. I told him not to worry. I'd find a place to crash. Later that afternoon, I was working the trap when I got the word that some dudes were coming for me. There didn't seem to be any place I could go where they wouldn't find me. So I called my brother, Rickie, to come get me.

There was a long silence on the phone before he moaned, "What for?"

“I just told you. Some guys have a contract out on me, and they’re headin’ up here right now. You gotta come get me.”

“Why don’t you just go home? Quit hanging out on that corner.”

“Home? You know I can’t go home! Me and Derrick are homeless, man! We don’t got no place to go … thanks to you.”

“Oh yeah, so now it’s all my fault, is it?”

“I ain’t sayin’ that, but you gotta come. You gotta come get me right now, Rickie.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Another long silence. “Okay, I’ll be there in a while.” Click! He hung up.

I had waited … and waited, dodging in and out of

Temptations until the owner threatened to call the cops.

Then I hung out behind the Circle-K for a while, then across the road in the bushes around the Ridgecrest Apartments. I ended up waiting five hours before Rickie finally showed up. I could’ve been dead by then!

He hadn’t come straight. He’d stopped off at a strip club and spent all that time leering at girls and drinking before he finally showed up. Why would he do that to me? He didn’t seem to care what might have happened to me while he was ogling some broad.

As I sat on that rock, the questions started pounding in my head. Why didn’t anyone in my family want me to stay with them? Why didn’t they care? Why did they treat us like they didn’t even love us? Why did I drop out of school? Why did my dad have to be gay? Why wasn’t he there for us? Why was I born if he didn’t want me? Why did he treat Mom so badly she ran off with that dumb truck driver? Why didn’t she choose us over him?

Absently, I spun the cylinder of the revolver. There were no answers to my questions. Life was as arbitrary as where the cylinder stopped when I spun it, like Russian roulette. I spun it again and put the muzzle of the gun up to my head. Unlike Russian roulette, all chambers were loaded.

That would be one way to end this misery. If I weren’t here anymore, I wouldn’t need any answers. Maybe that would be better. Yeah, much better. What if I just shot myself right now? I pulled the gun away from my head and held it in my hand. It would be sure thing. No missing with a piece like this. It would do the job, no question about that. I put the gun back to my head and envisioned pulling the trigger.

Then I started crying. It might be better, but it would sure be too bad.

Suddenly, my sobs came stronger, and I couldn’t hold them back. Everything was coming down on me all at once. A hundred thoughts, a thousand questions, all unanswered.

Man, I should just do it! Right now! Right here! That would be better, make everything easier, end the questions. I

wouldn’t have to hurt anymore. Wouldn’t have to be alone anymore. It would be better if I just finished it.

But could I?

Did I have the courage?

Yes! I could do it! I cocked the Dirty Harry, put my finger on the trigger, and began to pull when I heard footsteps coming through the woods.

Oh no. This was too private a thing to let anyone else see me. I put the gun down, rubbed the tears from my eyes, and stole a glance over my shoulder. A figure appeared out of the woods, coming toward the clearing. I recognized him, a young guy from Chicago named Lamar who sang in a group called Subway.

“Wassup, Damien? That you back here?”

“Yeah, man. Yeah, man.” I kept my eyes averted. “What you doin’?”

“Ah, I’m just smokin’ my blunt, man. You want a hit?”

He took a hit but didn’t sit down.

As soon as I thought my eyes wouldn’t betray me, I looked up. “So, how’d you find me out here, anyway? Not many people know ’bout this place.”

“Derrick figured you’d be out here. Told me to come tell you the coast was clear.”

“Oh yeah? Good. Okay, you go on back. I’ll be along directly.”

I waited until he left, then stood up, reeling a little from so much alcohol and weed … or maybe it was the realization I would’ve been dead if that kid hadn’t come along.

Oh yes, I’m dealin’ with some stress,
So much deception.
This oppression got my mind twisted.
Dark reflection, light just dimmed.
I think I lost my sight just then,
Panicked and I lost my grip,
Frantic, as I grasp for wind….
They temptin’ me
To grip a pistol and commence to be
Something other than what was meant for me.
My father told me, “Son, be holy.
Don’t let the devil regain control
And don’t go to hell
Where most are going.”
But now I’m rollin’
Out of control, it’s showin’.
Talked to my brother,
Told him I’m blowin’, growin’,
Tryin’ to maintain my soul and hopin’,
Holdin’ on to younger days that’s gone.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

I SAT there on the rock a few minutes after Lamar left, thinking, Guess this wasn't my day to die. I didn't know whether to be glad or sad, but my day would surely come soon enough. I was nearly seventeen, and whether I took my own life or someone else took it for me, I did not expect to see my eighteenth birthday. It just wasn't in the cards for someone like me.

I stood up, tucked the gun down the front of my pants, letting my red San Francisco 49ers jersey fall down over it, and strolled back down the path through the woods toward the Circle-K.

When I got back to the trap, business had picked up. Customers were coming and going, some burnedout addicts, some kids wanting to party, some dealers who took our merchandise, cut it and resell it. I had no respect for any of them, even those who were our best customers. The addicts repulsed me, and the party druggies infuriated me. The dealers were cheats. Funny how when someone else does what you've been doing all along, you can see so easily why it's wrong, but I never let that insight change me.

I got to the trap in a sour mood just as a yellow Beamer drove up with a bunch of rich kids in it—three guys and a couple of blond girls. I walked up to them. "What y'all doin' around here, anyway? This ain't your neighborhood."

“Hey, my man! How’s it hangin’?” The guy riding shotgun grinned, trying to sound cool. “We’re just out shop- ping.” He wiggled his eyebrows up and down. “Know what I mean?”

“So where’s your money?” “How much?”

“How much you got?” I pulled up my jersey just enough so they could see my Dirty Harry. “Give me all of it. All y’all, and make it quick!”

They fumbled around until the guy handed me a fat handful of bills through the window.

“Now get outta here ’fore I blow your heads off.”

“But hey, man, we gave you our money. We came here to buy some rock. Know what I mean? We heard you got some real good stuff.”

“I don’t got no drugs.” I turned my pockets inside out. “What you just bought was your life … but only if you do what I say. Put your damn car in gear and get the hell out of our hood. You don’t belong around here…. And by the way, I ain’t your man! Got it?”

They obeyed.

I walked back to the bench outside Temptations while the other guys kept busy. So, why’d I do that, anyway? I leaned forward with my elbows on my knees and my head in my hands. Well, it was the truth! I rationalized. I didn’t have any drugs on me right then. My stash was still hidden in the ceiling of the Circle-K bathroom. Nevertheless, I’d made out

like a bandit—In fact, I was the bandit, robbing those kids at gunpoint! What a sorry Nigga I'd become.

I shook my head, ready to go back out to the rock and finish what I'd started, when three cop cars pulled into the parking lot, and everyone began yelling and running. "Here come the PoPo!" "Five-O, Five-O. Better blow!" But for some reason Derrick and Chachi didn't run fast enough, and they were some of the first to be grabbed.

I just sat there, not believing what was going down. Maybe that was why the cops ignored me. Suddenly I remembered my Dirty Harry stuck down my pants. They'd bust me for sure if they found it. Slowly I got to my feet and strolled over to the trash can, turned so my back was toward the busy police, and let the big gun fall down into the garbage—half-empty cups of soda, beer cans, snot-filled Kleenexes, and a dirty diaper.

When I looked back, one of the cops had Derrick spreadeagle across the hood of a squad car. I started walking toward them. "Hey! Hey! What y'all doing to my brother? Huh? That's my brother you're messin' with. What y'all think you're doing, anyway?" Ha! I don't know what I thought I was doing. Maybe I felt a need to make up for being such a jerk, such a worthless scumbag earlier in the day. Heck, if I was ready to kill myself, might as well put myself on the line for the only family who had ever stuck by me. I got louder, waving my arms. "Why y'all messing with my brother? Y'all love harassing people?"

The cop who was frisking Derrick glanced over his shoulder as I approached. "You keep talking and you're going to be in

a world of hurt, boy. Now back off. You hear me?”

“What you gonna do ’bout it? Come on! Search me. I ain’t got nothin’ on me. You can’t do nothing’ to me. I can’t stand y’all pigs! Why don’t you leave us alone?”

Without realizing it, two cops had come up behind me. They grabbed my arms and twisted.

“Hey, whatchu doin’? You can’t do nothin’ to me. Y’all ain’t got nothing on me.”

“Oh yeah? I think we smell alcohol on you.”

I started struggling. “That don’t prove nothin’. My old man spilled it on me at home.”

“Then you won’t mind if we search you, will you?”

“Go ahead. You won’t find nothin’.” Out of the corner of my eye I watched as the cops continued to search Derrick and Chachi, certain that they were going to be busted big time—bags of weed, rock, and who knew what else. But there was no evidence piling up on the hoods of the squad cars. How could that be? Maybe Derrick and Chachi had never picked up their merchandise, either.

Ha! Again we’d fooled the cops!

The nametag of the cop who searched me read: “Lawyer.” Strange name for a cop. He pulled out my pockets … empty. Then he spun me around and reached down in a narrow little pocket on the side of my baggy pants that I’d forgotten

about. He jerked his hand high in the air. “Ah ha! What have we here?”

“Hey man! That ain’t mine! That’s a plant! What you tryin’ to do? Hey, you can’t do that!”

But he’d already slapped the cuffs on me. “You’re under arrest for possession of a controlled substance. You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can be used …”

How stupid I’d been. I had completely forgotten about that pocket and the bag of rock in it. Like slow motion, Officer Lawyer guided me to his squad car, opened the back door and pushed me in, barely making sure that I didn’t crack my head on the door jam.

I was headed to jail.

I had always outrun the cops, leading them on a merry chase through the housing projects in spite of their choppers and dogs. But this time I had virtually offered myself to them. I watched through the windows of the squad car as—to my surprise—the cops let Derrick and Chachi go after yelling at them for a while. But they were taking me in … probably mostly because of my big mouth.

The first stop was the hospital to make sure I hadn’t swallowed a bunch of drugs that might kill me. Then they took me to jail and gave me the full treatment—fingerprints, mug shots, and all the red tape. When they wanted to know where I lived, I couldn’t even remember Mom and Charles’s address. I’d been there a couple of times, but I couldn’t

recall the numbers, so I gave them Dad's address. What did it matter? I didn't live with either of them.

That night my feelings were conflicted. The hard pallet was not as hard as that telephone transformer box I sometimes slept on. I did have a roof over my head, something in my stomach. Somehow, I had a sense of relief that all the craziness was over. Whatever my sentence might be, I could finally get off the train without shooting myself in the head.

"Oh, God, don't let them send me to jail for a long time," I muttered, wondering if God paid any attention to prayers from a puke like me.

When I went before a judge the next day, Officer Lawyer glared at me from the second row in the courtroom. The judge ask about where I lived and a couple of other questions unrelated to my case, but even though I wanted to be done with the craziness, when he asked me about the crack the cops found on me, I started jiving. "I had no idea what that was, Your Honor. It wasn't mine. I mean, I was in the Circle-K buying some candy for my little sister when I saw this little bag right there by the red licorice sticks. It didn't have any price on it, so I figured it wasn't for sale. Someone had just left it there, so I put it in my pocket and forgot all about it. Honest, Your Honor! I didn't know what it was until the officer said it was some kind of a drug."

The judge flipped through some papers, then closed the folder with them in it and tapped it on his bench like a gavel. I was expecting him to call Officer Lawyer to testify against me, but instead he said, "Young man, I don't believe a word you've told me, but since you have no priors, I'm

going to let you go with this warning: If you ever come before me again, I will lock you up for as long as I can, so stay out of trouble. Got that?”

“Yes, Your Honor!” What had he said? He was letting me go? “Oh, thank you Your Honor. You’ll never see me again. You can be sure of that!”

He called the next case, then as an afterthought, he turned to me again. “And stay away from that drug spot, too. I don’t want to hear that you’ve even been in that neighborhood. Understood?”

I nodded as I turned to go and glanced over at Officer Lawyer who was shaking his head. He grinned and raised his hand and pointed, lowering his cocked thumb as if he were shooting at me.

But that time he had missed.

I went back to the block, high-fiving all the guys and grinning like I’d hit a homerun. The fact was, I intended to stop selling drugs and reform my life. I flushed my stash down the toilet of the Circle-K, but pocketed my money … part of it the cash I’d robbed from those rich kids. Hey, I had to have something to live on.

* * * *

My reformation lasted about two weeks. Even after Flip had closed his “music studio” and went back to Philadelphia, Derrick and I continued working on our music, and since a lot of musicians used drugs, that had often gave

us a way to get to know them. So I tried to focus more on music. Derrick and I made up some cassette tapes with sample tracks of our stuff and went to a “Jack the Rapper” convention in Atlanta. We didn’t have the four-hundred bucks for admission, so we snuck in through an unlocked back door. Inside we met some headline artists: Mary J. Bilge, Kid ’n Play, and Jodeci. Wow! With contacts like that, it might happen for us!

But not much came of it, and pretty soon I realized my life wasn’t much better being out of the drug business. I still hung with the same guys, still faced the possibility of being arrested by the cops just for being a part of a drugdealing crew. All the old pressures were back: The threat of being ripped off or robbed. I couldn’t walk through certain neighborhoods because they belonged to rivals. Bloods had a beef with the Crips. Crips were mad because some of the Folk had a truce with the Bloods, and of course the Folk hated the P-Stones and the Vice Lords. All the truces were breaking down, and no one was safe. It seemed like drive-by hits happened nearly every day when someone pulled out a shotgun and blew someone’s face off. That made the threats I kept getting a whole lot more than empty rumors.

Added to all this, Derrick and I still didn’t have a place to live or decent, regular meals, and … and I was going broke.

What else could I do but go back into business?

At first it was, “I’ll just sell a couple of rocks to get a little cash … until I get a job.” That lasted about a day before I was slanging as much product as ever. And like always, the money came rolling in so that I soon bought a chocolate

brown Capri. The engine barely ran, but a friend named Black agreed to put in a new engine for me. So I parked it in front of a vacant apartment where we sometimes crashed, paid six hundred dollars for another engine, and we began working on it in the mornings when business was slow.

Sometimes when Derrick and I couldn't find a vacant apartment, we slept in the car. Actually, that felt good. I finally had something that was mine. But it took money, and I also intended to flip the Capri and get a Cadillac as soon as I could, so I had to keep working the trap.

* * * *

One day a rented Ryder truck pulled into the parking lot at the Circle-K. It was a beat-up vehicle driven by a white woman who looked pretty rough. She had on shades and just looked strange to me. A guy in the front seat beside her leaned out the window and called to us where we were sitting on the bench in front of Temptations.

"Hey you guys got any work?" He waffled his hand. "You know, any …" He looked around as though he didn't want anyone to overhear. It was obvious he was asking about drugs, but I had a bad feeling.

Chachi rose and started toward them. "Yeah, I got—" "Chachi, NO," I yelled.

He turned back to us and spread his arms, eyes open wide as if to say, "What's with you? This is my business, so get off my back."

I shook my head. “Chachi, don’t do it. Not here, not now.”

He waved me off and turned back to the truck. When he was halfway there, he pulled out a couple of bags to show them.

Suddenly, the back door slid up and four SWAT police jumped out in their assault gear, automatic weapons at the ready. One was Officer Lawyer. “On the deck! On the deck! Every one of you face down on the ground, arms behind your backs. Right now! Right now!”

Officer Lawyer charged right for me, knocked me down, and cuffed my hands behind my back with a thick plastic tie before I could even make a move. Some lawyer he’d make, was all I could think as I lay with my face on the asphalt while he yanked me around and searched me. He was determined to find something he could use to put me away. But I was clean.

“You got nothin’?” he asked as he let me up.

“No sir.” I struggled to my feet without the aid of my hands. The frustration in his red face looked about ready to explode, and I feared he’d knock me down again at any moment.

“Then what are you doin’ in this neighborhood? I thought the judge told you to stay away from here.”

“Hey. I live around here.”

“That’s not what you told him when you were in court. You said your dad lived way over in … I don’t remember, but I

know it wasn’t around here.”

I took a deep breath and twisted my wrists so the PlastiCuffs didn’t cut so deep. I felt a little braver thinking of how I might explain myself. “Well, I wasn’t doin’ nothing wrong. I was just hanging out with some of my school friends.”

“School? You talkin’ ’bout that boy they’re bustin’ right now.” He pointed toward Chachi who was being put in a squad car that had pulled up. “He one of your friends?”

I shrugged.

“I’m gonna take you in as an accessory. You know the accountability law allows me to charge you even if you weren’t holdin’.”

I looked down at the ground and took a deep breath. “Please, Officer Lawyer.” I made my voice sound as respectful as I could. “Please don’t do that, sir. I wasn’t doing anything wrong. In fact, if you heard me, I was trying to tell Chachi not to sell any drugs. But he just wouldn’t listen.” I glanced up for a moment. The cop seemed to be softening, so I shrugged and gave him an I-couldn’t-help-it look. “Hey, I’ll leave right now. Okay?”

He gritted his teeth and shook his head in disgust. “All right! All right! Get out of here. But don’t you ever come back. Hear?”

“Yes sir.” I walked away, my wrists still held behind me by the PlastiCuffs. I’d find somewhere to cut them off … and I

would reform! I didn’t want to get shot or spend the rest of my life in prison. When I looked back, they were driving Chachi and Derrick away. They had gotten my brother, too.

I kept walking. But to where? I still had no place to go.

To brothaz that’s heartless,
That stack money by trappin’ narcotics
till government got us,
And put us with the rest of they statisics.
But I be a leavin’.
I’m younger than my brother you keepin’.
And he gone be leavin’,
’Cause you ain’t got no evidence, Steven.
So go to the captain tell him careful
something
could happen. If somebody catch ’em in
places
where nobody can help ’em.
Can’t no longer take it, was contemplatin’
turnin’
to Satan. The future awaken me.
Let me know the demons was makin’ me
Take it to get it.
Three in the morning lickin’ the Phillips.
I pay for the fill up,
Then give it back and everything wit’ it.
Don’t wanna continue, no longer fun.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

CHACHI AND Derrick got released in a couple of days, and I was glad to see them back on the block, but three nights later, the cops raided our trap again. We ran like dry leaves before a stiff wind ... across the road, up the bank, and through the Ridgecrest Apartments to the laundry room on the backside of the complex. It smelled of perfumed soap, clogged drains, and old sewage, but it was warm—a good place to drink and smoke weed and hide out when we needed to. And all the residents knew not to come in there if the door was closed.

We finally calmed down and broke out some liquor and weed. Tattoo, another of our homies, came in and joined us. He offered to put a new tattoo on Chachi's arm. We mellowed out while Tattoo got busy with an old sewing needle and a BIC Pen.

"Ya know," said Derrick, "I think we got some snitches on the block."

"Whaddaya sayin'?" I held up the blunt I'd just rolled to inspect it.

"Think about it. The day before we got arrested, those two Crips got picked up, and you know they were holding some serious dope, but they were back on the street the next morning like nothin' happened. Then the cops raided us that afternoon. The same thing happened yesterday. That skinny guy got arrested—and for a fact, I know he had rocks in his

pockets—but he was back this morning. Now here comes another raid. Somebody's got loose lips."

"Yeah," Chachi said. "We were lucky to get away. Those cops were swarming everywhere."

I lit the blunt. "They try to flip you guys when you were in?"

"You better believe it. They always try, but we didn't say nothin'. Not one word."

"Well, I'm thinkin' you can't trust nobody anymore." Chachi winced as Tattoo pricked his arm with the needle. "Some of these punks would steal from their own mama."

"You know that's right." Tattoo held up his needle and jabbed it in the air as if he were popping balloons. "How

'bout that dude who stole twenty pounds of weed from his sister's boyfriend." He shook his head and went back to work on Chachi's arm.

"Yeah, and he almost got hacked to pieces for it, too—ouch, man, that hurt." Chachi frowned at Tattoo.

"Well, hold still, and quit bein' a wimp." Tattoo was quiet for a moment. "Whaddaya mean, almost got hacked to pieces?"

"That weed belonged to some Jamaicans, and they came after him with machetes, came right up in his house. Threatened to chop up his mom and his family, too."

I leaned forward with my head in my hands, rocking back and forth as I sat on the top of a dryer. Someone's clothes were still tumbling and thumping inside, and the top was comfortingly warm. But all this running and hiding was getting too crazy. Everywhere I went, I had to watch over my shoulder to see if the cops were coming or if somebody was about to jump me. I couldn't take it anymore. Something had to change!

BLAMB!

The door flew open so hard it almost came off its hinges. Cops! I thought. But it was Mike, one of our drug suppliers, his face as angry as the devil's own. He waved a TEC-9 automatic assault pistol back and forth at us and started screaming: "Who broke into my house? … I said, who broke into my house? One a' y'all robbed me! Now where's my money?"

Tattoo froze. Chachi glared at Mike. "What money, man? You're crazy. We never took nothin' from you!"

I slid off the dryer and raised my hands, palms toward him. "Calm down now, Mike. None of us broke into your place. Whaddaya talkin' about, anyway?"

In two strides he had the short barrel of the TEC-9 pressed so hard against my temple it pushed my head over onto my shoulder. "You know what I'm talkin' 'bout. I'm talkin' 'bout my ten thousand bucks. That's what! Now where is it? I'll blow your head off, right now. You know I will!"

“Hey, man,” Derrick tried to distract him before he squeezed off a burst and blasted my brains all over the laundry room. “We’ve never been in your place. I don’t even know where you live. So calm down.”

That just caused Mike to jump over to Derrick and press the gun up under his chin. “You’re lying! You lie!”

I could see Mike’s finger squeezing the trigger. How much further before the rata-tat-tat?

“Come on, man!” Chachi pled.

Mike swung on him. “You think you can play with me? I know what y’all do. I know you break into houses. You broke into my house!” His face twisted like a pretzel. “Why would you do that? Haven’t I been good to y’all? I never cheated you. Always got you the good dope. So why …?” His voice got tight as if he were about ready to cry.

“Wait a minute,” I said. “Seriously, we never stole nothin’ from you, Mike. Listen—”

“No, you listen.” He jumped back to me and punched the TEC-9’s barrel right between my eyes. I could see his finger moving a little. Mike was so hyped up, he was surely going to blow one of us away at any moment—and it looked like it was going to be me. Death stared me in the face, cold steel vibrating against my forehead. A sharp pain ran down my neck as though plowing a path for a stream of bullets.

I couldn’t breathe. What a mess I’d made of my life, and now it was over.

Then, for some reason, Mike stepped back, waving the gun at us all. “I’m gonna find out! I’m gonna find out who did it, and if it’s one of y’all, I’m gonna blow your head off.” He stormed out, slamming the door behind him.

For a moment, we froze. Then Chachi jumped up. “I’m gonna kill that Nigga right now! Nobody puts a gun on my head and doesn’t use it!”

I grabbed his arm as he lunged toward the door. “Hold on, Chachi. Let’s just take a breath. Know what I’m sayin’? Just take a breath.”

He yanked his arm away. “I always said, if you’re gonna put a gun on my head you better use it, ’cause you won’t get another chance! That punk didn’t use it, now he’s gonna die.” He stormed out.

The rest of us followed, out into the night, walking behind Chachi as he strode toward his house to get the right weapon. “Chachi,” Derrick said, “don’t do this, man. The guy was out of his mind. Any of us would be crazy if someone broke into our place and stole ten grand.”

Chachi glanced at us over his shoulder. “Ha! Y’all don’t have no place for anyone to break in to.”

“Don’t matter. Mike’s cool, man. We oughta be helpin’ him find out who robbed him rather than going after him.”

“Nobody puts a gun to my head,” Chachi muttered, still stomping along, and we kept following. Or at least Derrick and Tattoo did. I started falling farther and farther behind.

What was going on here? Everything was out of control. I'd never been so scared as when Mike pressed that gun into my forehead. But why? I didn't think I was afraid to die. It was the trauma of it all. I might as well shoot myself. If I didn't, someone else was surely going to do it, and it'd be much worse. I should've finished myself off that day on the rock.

But I hadn't. Something told me there was a reason I hadn't pulled the trigger that day. But what?

By this time, Chachi, Derrick, and Tattoo were out of sight, and I had no stomach to catch up with them. I was sick of this craziness! Wandering back to the vacant apartment where we were crashing, I drank myself to sleep.

* * * *

I don't know what happened that night, but Chachi didn't end up shooting Mike. Derrick, Chachi, and I decided to dial it down a bit, especially since the cops seemed to be turning the heat up on us. We needed some insulation from all the risks and pressures, so we gave more responsibility to a few lieutenants we thought could handle the trap and only showed up often enough to oversee business. That seemed to be working until one day when five or six of us were standing around smoking weed near "our" vacant apartment where my friend Black was working on my car.

The property management people hadn't been around in a couple of weeks because the unit was slated for remodeling and the contractors were busy elsewhere. So we kind of

made it our headquarters with Derrick and me sleeping there at night and keeping our guns and drugs inside.

Black was almost finished working on my car, and we were going to go for a spin in it when a clean-cut-looking white guy walked up and asked us where he could get a twenty-bag. No one answered him for a few moments. Finally, Chachi said, “We ain’t got no dope around here.” Guess he’d learned his lesson about offering a quick sale to strangers.

“Ah, come on, man,” the guy said. “I know you got drugs. You’re smokin’ weed right now. Anyone can smell the cloud from across the street.”

We shrugged—what was a little weed?—and gazed off into the distance, hoping he would take the hint and disap- pear. But he just stood there.

“Hey, I’m cool. I’m cool. Just let me get a twenty from you. Okay?”

I looked him in the eye. “What’s up with you, anyway, man? I know you don’t smoke crack. I can see it in your face. You’re undercover, but that don’t matter, ’cause we don’t have no drugs around here. Understand?” I turned to the other guys. “He’s a narc. That’s for sure. Let’s get outta here.” Black slammed the hood on my car, and we started up the little walk toward the apartment.

The white dude followed us. “Hey, man,” he said, extending his arms to both sides as if pleading. “I said I was cool. Come on, sell me a twenty? I want something to smoke.”

Black turned around and took a couple of quick steps, coming all up in his face. “Man, didn’t we tell you we don’t got nothin’? Whaddaya doin’ hangin’ ’round here? You better get outta this neighborhood, ’cause it’s a bad neighborhood, and something bad’s liable to happen to you if you don’t go on home. Know what I’m sayin’? I mean like right now!” Black punched his finger in the guy’s chest for emphasis.

The guy rolled his eyes, turned, and started across the parking lot. As a parting shot, he turned back and gave us the finger.

Black was wiry, slim, and fast, but he’d built up a lot of muscle when he was in prison. He exploded after that guy with his hand cocked all the way back. The guy heard him coming and turned just as Black’s hand connected with the side of his head. Whap! From twenty yards away, it sounded like a sledgehammer on concrete. The guy flew through the air and hit the ground on his side.

Something snapped in the rest of us, and we all ran over and started pounding on him, kicking him in the ribs and the face. Finally we stopped and backed off. Slowly he rolled up on all fours, got to his feet and staggered away.

But I had a bad feeling. Something was about to happen, especially if he really was a narc.

I’m stuck in the center.
I was a beginner, but now it’s like regular feelin’.
I stay reminiscin’, it have me flippin’,
Right when I’m chillin’ cause nobody asked,
“Shank, why you … looking so bad?”
Come sing me a song, or better yet,
just read me a poem.
So we can go on our separate ways,
you leave me alone.
They treated us wrong,
But better days was coming along
When troubles are gone,
No longer stressin’, rollin’ a cone
’Cause reefas so plentiful take a hit and press it along
Till ten of ’em gone.
Last Bud, packin’ the bong.
The problems ain’t leavin’ so face it! I can’t make it at
home!
I’ll do it alone since everybody out for their own.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

AS THAT narc staggered away, we returned to the steps of the apartment. I shook my head with a sense of foreboding. If that guy was a cop, there'd be hell to pay for beating him like we had.

Sure enough, a couple minutes later a half-dozen unmarked cop cars wheeled into the parking lot from three different directions. Everybody split, running like rabbits between apartments to get away. But I was sick and tired of running, so I just put my hands up and stood there while two cops ran up to me, guns drawn, threw me on the ground, and cuffed me.

"You have any drugs? Weapons?" one asked.

I had some crack in my mouth, so I just swallowed it. "No."

"This your apartment?" "No."

The cop who'd cuffed me pulled me to my feet as his partner pushed on the door. It was open. "Hey, looks like we've been invited in."

"Clear it."

Three cops went in. In a moment, they came out with a few samples. "We got a real arsenal in there and enough pharmaceuticals to light up the whole neighborhood."

“Hey, that’s not mine,” I protested. “I don’t even know who lives there. We were just sittin’ here on the steps ’cause it didn’t look like anybody was home.”

“Yeah, and that’s why everyone scattered like scared maniacs.”

I shrugged. “Maybe some of them knew what was in there, but I didn’t run.”

“Humph.” The cop told me I was under arrests for possession of controlled substances and illegal weapons and read me my rights. “Young man, you’re going to jail.”

“Yeah. Whatever.”

He started to walk me toward his car. “You know, this is the time when you start making a deal, telling us who all that stuff belongs to, and we start reducing the charges. Who knows? You might walk with nothing more than a slap on the wrist. Whaddaya say?”

“I ain’t got nothin’ to say.”

He opened the backdoor of his unmarked car—the door with no handle on the inside—and pushed my head down as I slid into the seat. “That’s your decision, kid. But we’ve got a pile of evidence, and if all that comes down on your head, you won’t see the streets again until my grandkids are in college, and I ain’t even married yet.”

I sat alone in the back of the cruiser facing the grill and realized I already was locked up. What a fool I’d been. Another cruiser pulled up with Black sitting in the back.

How’d they catch him so fast? And then I remembered he’d only recently gotten out of prison. Obviously, they were keeping tabs on him, and if that guy we beat up was undercover, he certainly would have recognized Black and known where he lived.

My arresting officer came back and got in the driver’s seat. He glanced at me in his mirror. “The guy y’all beat up is in pretty bad shape. Might lose his sight. We’re thinking of raising the charges to attempted murder. You sure you don’t have anything to say?”

“Look, officer, I had nothing to do with what happened.” Which of course wasn’t true, but I hadn’t been the worst offender.

“Doesn’t matter. You were here, part of this crew when it went down. The accountability law makes you liable … unless you want to work out a deal. As you can see, we already got another one of your buddies. Pretty soon there won’t be anyone else you can bargain with.”

When I didn’t respond, he slammed his door and headed for the police station.

* * * *

I sat in a jail cell for several days, completely sober for the first time in who knew how long. But the reality of my life drove me deeper and deeper into a depression. I was sick and tired of everything, tired of looking over my shoulder, tired of people trying to kill me, tired of running from the police, tired of gangbanging.

With nowhere else to turn and no one to help me, I finally broke down. “Oh God, if you’re there, help me this one last time, and I’ll change.” I meant it. And somehow that bit of sincerity gave me a faint glimmer of hope. Maybe God would help me.

I’d been given one phone call when I was first arrested, but I didn’t know whom to call, so I didn’t even bother. But while I was in jail, I learned that if one of my parents didn’t show up at my hearing, things might go much worse for me. And that made sense because I’d known kids who’d been sent away to youth homes even though they hadn’t been convicted of an actual crime. So on the day I was to appear in court, when the guard offered me another call, I took it and called my brother, thinking he was the most likely person to reach.

Unfortunately, the call went to voicemail. “Hey Rickie, today’s my court date. Tell either Mom or Dad they have to come and be there for me? If no one’s there, I’m liable to be sent away to a home for unsupervised juveniles. Please, this is very important! One of them has to come!”

After breakfast, thirteen of us were shackled—all dressed in our orange jumpsuits—and loaded us into a white van with bars on the windows, and taken to the courthouse. After searching us again for weapons, they lined us up and marched us straight into the courtroom—the cases for that day. As I entered the courtroom, I kept my head bowed, eyes on the floor in the most humble manner possible.

“Turn and face the judge,” the deputy sheriff said. I turned and glanced up.

Oh no! I'd drawn the same judge I'd faced previously. He was going to have me for sure this time!

"Gentlemen, you are my docket for the day. We'll have to move right along to get to you all, so I won't tolerate any foolishness. Is that understood? You'll wait in the other room until your case is called. Now …" He shuffled some papers, looking at them through his half-moon glasses. "Who do we have here?"

I lowered my head again, hoping he wouldn't recognize me as he went down the line comparing his documents with the young men lined up before him.

"You, Mr. Jackson. I know you. You've been in my courtroom before."

I shrugged and turned to the guys on either side of me as though he must be talking to someone else.

"No, you. I know exactly who you are. I remember you."

I finally looked up to face him straight on.

"Yeah, you!" He frowned as he peered over his glasses. "You already know what your fate is, don't you. You're not going home. I'm sure you know that by now? You're going to do at least five years."

I thought, He can't say that. I haven't even had my trial yet.

As though reading my mind, he said, "You don't think so? I warned you last time that I'd send you away if you ever

came before me again, and”—he raised his hands and eyebrows—“here you are again.” He let that sink in for a moment. “Are your parents here?”

I glanced around at the few people in the courtroom. “Not yet, Your Honor.”

“Son, if you don’t have any parents or family who care enough about you to show up when you are facing serious charges like these”—he tapped the papers with his finger—“then I don’t know why we should waste the court’s time. I’ll just remand you to the State where you can get some supervision in a boy’s home until you’re twenty-one.” He looked back at the papers in his hand. “Do you even have an attorney, anyone to represent you?”

“No, Your Honor.”

He shrugged as though it didn’t really matter. “Then the Public defender will represent you.” He backhanded the air as though to brush me away and went on to the next person.

If he was trying to scare me, it worked. I went back to the holding cell with the other guys to await my case, convinced mine would be a sentencing, not a hearing.

The Public Defender came around to each of us. He knew no more about me than what was on the sheet of paper he held—which he scanned hurriedly—and he didn’t have time to learn much more. He glanced up. “Looks like your case was scheduled either first or second.”

“Oh, no! That’s no good. You gotta do something. There’s no way my parents could get here this soon, and you heard what the judge said. If they don’t show, I won’t even get a hearing!”

“Well, did you call your parents?”

“I left a message on my brother’s cell. But I don’t know if they got it.”

He shook his head. “There’s nothing I can do about that.” And he went on to the next man.

Oh great! An overworked and disinterested PD and no time for my mom or dad to get to court even if they wanted to! I was going away for sure. As I waited, I again found myself praying. “God, if you are real, if you’re alive, then please help me get out of this mess, and I’ll never sell another rock.” I was so sick of my life, so frightened of how it would end and exhausted from the craziness, I really did want out.

* * * *

My case was not called first or second or even third, and my hopes began to rise. Maybe there would be time for Mom or Dad to get to court … if they ever got my phone message. But as the hours dragged on, and my case still wasn’t called, another fear gripped me: What if they came and were sitting out there but gave up and went home, thinking they had the wrong date or the wrong courtroom? Even if they did know they were in the right place, did they care enough about me to wait all day?

The deputy came around with a box of sack lunches—baloney between two slices of white bread, a couple of cookies in a packet, and a juice box—and said court was recessed for lunch, so we might as well eat, too. I could hardly force the stuff down my throat. Why hadn't they called my case yet? Was the judge so certain he was going to send me off to a boy's home that he was calling the other cases that needed time for a hearing? That was the only explanation I could imagine.

My anxiety increased. I probably looked like a thug, so why wouldn't he send me away? My face was rough from sleeping outdoors and not eating right, and my hair was knotted in cornrows. The judge probably thinks I look like a gangster. I gotta change that! I started taking them out as quickly as I could. I splashed a little water on my hair, trying to slick it back and hold it in a ponytail with a rubber band, but it didn't work very well. I didn't have a hair pick or comb or anything, and after wearing it in cornrows for so long, it was going to take some time to look neat. But by the time I realized this, it was too late. I already had half of them out.

The afternoon ticked by until only three of us were left. If my mom or dad were out there, they certainly wouldn't wait this long.

The deputy called the next guy and a half hour later the next one, and I was left alone. What was happening?

By the time the deputy came in and said, "Jackson, Damien? Let's go. Your case is up." I had completely given up hope. Still, when I walked into the courtroom, I searched all the faces for someone I knew … no family! But at that

very moment, the door in the back of the courtroom opened and my mother and brother Rickie walked in.

My jaw dropped open. How could Rickie show up here? He had warrants out on him! If anyone ran his ID, he'd be arrested on the spot. But there they were. Someone cared! It felt as if God himself had arrived to help me.

I whispered to my PD that my mom was there and pointed her out. He nodded. "Well then, at least you'll get a hearing." He didn't sound too happy, probably because if my case went to trial that just meant more work for him.

When the DA presented his opening statements, he included everything: the drugs and weapons found in the apartment as well as the beating of the undercover agent. I kept expecting my PD to object like they do on TV, but he didn't say a word. If something didn't happen, I'd be going to jail for sure. Maybe a youth home would be better.

I leaned over and whispered, "Tell 'em the guns and drugs weren't mine. There's no way they can prove that. And say I didn't take part in the beating. There aren't any witnesses saying I did, are there?"

He just shrugged, but he scribbled something on a note and passed it to the DA.

The DA continued painting a heavy case against me, then looked down at the note and paused. Suddenly I heard him say, "On the other hand, Your Honor, the State would like to change its recommendation in this case. Instead of jail time,

I’m recommending we give him probation and another chance.”

“What?” The judge sat up straight as if he’d been startled from a sound sleep. He pulled off his glasses and leaned forward, glaring at the District Attorney. “What did I just hear you say?” He glanced over at me as if he didn’t want me to hear the words repeated. Personally, I couldn’t believe I’d heard right, either.

“I said, Your Honor, that the State recommends probation in this case. I think this young man deserves an- other chance.” The DA looked around until he found my mother.

“That’s his mother right there, and I think this boy needs to go home with her and try one more time.”

“You know he’s already had a second chance, don’t you? Probably several of them. And now after reading me this list of guns and drugs and a vicious attack on a police officer, you are preferring probation?” The judge’s face had turned red, his eyes bulging.

The DA shrugged. “Yes. That’s the State’s recommendation, Your Honor.”

I looked from the judge to the DA and back again, hardly daring to breathe.

The judge glared at me and swore. Quickly, he turned to the court recorder. “That’s off the record!” Then he looked back at me. “Young man, if I ever see your sorry ass in this courtroom again, you will never go home! You understand?

Furthermore, you are banned from going into Gwinnett County for the rest of your life! I don’t care if you’re sixty years old, never cross the border again in your life, because the moment we catch you in Gwinnett, you’re going to jail. We’re not going to ask any questions, we won’t need any other cause. You’ll go straight to jail.”

He turned to the clerk. “See to it that he gets probation with these stipulations and that he remains under the supervision of a parent.”

Bam! His gavel came down. “Court adjourned!”

In a daze, I went straight from the courtroom to Rickie’s car still wearing the ugly orange suit from the county. It’s a wonder they let us out of the courthouse. But tucked in my mother’s purse were my release papers.

Now I ain’t sure if I got money,
or if I’m broke.
Do I got a twenty dollar bill
or was it smoked?
You’ll never make it out the ghetto smokin’
weed with your folks.
Everybody wants to make a million,
but you need a blunt to cope.
It seemed so obsolete when you was smokin’ on them shoits.
But every single buck that you spent on them poits,
Could have been another buck on your house or a boat.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

I WENT back to the jail and turned in the orange jumpsuit for my civilian clothes. The clerk even gave back my money — which he knew was drug money—and we left with me feeling as free as the wind.

But it wasn't quite that simple.

Sherry Holmes, my Probation Officer, was a no-nonsense white woman with short, blond, curly hair who looked like a drill sergeant in a uniform two sizes too small for her extra thirty pounds. Her office was in the De Kalb County building, the same gray "Bastille" where I'd been in jail. Just going there creeped me out.

"Where've you been staying?" she asked a few days later as I sat down across her desk from her.

"With my mom."

"But where? I said where?"

"At a lodge near South De Kalb Mall."

She waved both hands from side to side in front of her, canceling out that option. "Won't work. That's just temporary."—Oh, big news flash. What else was new about my mom?—"She'd need a permanent residence. Look, I've made some calls. You're to live with your dad. I already arranged it. Is that okay with you?"

I shrugged. The Suburban Lodge where my father was staying was also just an extended-stay motel—one room and a bath. The "kitchenette" was nothing more than an alcove with a sink, refrigerator, and a two-burner stove in the corner of the main room. But so what? If she thought that was an "apartment," that was okay with me. Any place would be better than bouncing around, squatting in vacant apartments, crashing with other drug dealers, or literally sleeping outside on a phone transformer box or in some poolside shed.

Then I realized she chose my father's place because it was just down Memorial Drive a short distance from the jail, all the easier for her to keep tabs on me. I was feeling hemmed in and alone. I sat up in the chair a little straighter. "Can my brother Derrick live with us, too?"

"That's up to your dad. I don't have anything to say about your bother. But, since you're still under eighteen, the State requires your dad to take you in. If he doesn't, we'll slap him with child neglect."

Ah-ha! "Child neglect!" That's what I've been experiencing all my life.

My PO flipped through some papers, then handed me a thick envelope. "And you've got some responsibilities of your own if you want to stay out of jail….

"One … No drugs! And I will be checking.

"Two … You're to attend a ten-week class called 'The Winning Circle'—location and times are listed in that

envelope. It’ll help you get your head straight. Miss one class and you go to jail. Be late for two classes and you go to jail. No excuses.

“Three … You have thirty days to find a job and begin paying the fines the court levied on you for beating that deputy.

“Four …Your curfew is 9 p.m. No excuses. Be in or get locked up.

“Five … You’re to come in here and meet with me every month. However, I may drop in and check on you anytime, anywhere. Understood?”

“Yes ma’am.” I nodded, realizing I wasn’t as free as I had imagined. “Uh, where am I supposed to find a job?”

She closed my file and put it back in the top drawer of the cabinet beside her desk then turned back with a bland expression on her face. “There’s a card in that envelope with a list of agencies. They might help, but don’t count on ’em. Finding a job’s your problem. Get one or go to work for the State … on the inside. Makes no difference to me. See you on the twenty-third of next month, or maybe sooner.” She turned on a plastic smile that made her look like a cat ready to pounce on a mouse.

I got up slowly and left, realizing I had some serious adjusting to do, but I was feeling lucky. I could do it! Though in the back of my mind a little voice reminded me my freedom was not a matter of luck but God’s answer to my

desperate prayer. And I'd better keep my part of the bargain.

I went back to the hood and gathered up my drugs from the places I'd stashed them. I should have flushed them down the toilet, but instead I tried praying again. "God, I know I promised to never sell a rock again—and I'm gonna keep that promise—but you know a lot of these guys have been my friends, and I might need them again sometime. I'm sure you'll understand." And I gave away those drugs to Derrick, Chachi, and some of my other homies.

Sometimes change comes slowly.

* * * *

The Winning Circle classes were like AA meetings. We had to go around and confess why we were there and how we were going to change. I got off on the wrong foot by complaining about all the rules: couldn't be late or miss class, curfew, and for me, being banned from Gwinnett County. The leader came right back at me. "You need an attitude adjustment, son, or you'll end up right back in jail. I've seen it happen to dozens of guys just like you."

The next day I went looking for a job. Hit three places with no luck and gave up. Everyone was prejudiced or required experience or references or maybe just didn't like the way I looked. It was an unfair world out there. I'd be better off running my own business … but, of course, I couldn't put that experience down on my job applications.

I let a week go by before I went out looking for work again, and then only because Dad was nagging me. But my luck was no better than on my first try. How was I supposed to get a job? Everyone I knew who had a job said they got hired because they knew someone. Yeah, and who do I know! I don't know anyone!

I fixed my hair and stole some new clothes and went job hunting again. Still no luck. This went on for two more weeks until I was down to the last of my money and I was getting worried. I'd burned through most of my cash on bus fare and buying weed. I'd promised God not to sell another rock, and I kept that promise. I quit selling drugs. But how was I supposed to make it from day to boring day without a little something to take the edge off, so to speak? It wasn't easy living with Dad. And he wouldn't let Derrick join us because by this time Derrick and his girlfriend, Cheyan, had a baby and she was expecting a second. Actually, Derrick and Cheyan got married and ended up moving into her mother's place, but that meant it was just my dad and me in that one-room dump, and every couple days he would kick me out so he could have a "guest." Not to mention the deadline my PO had set for getting a job, and I had to report in to her very soon.

With two days to go, a KFC franchise offered me a job working the drive-thru window. To get there, I had to transfer a couple of buses and ride for nearly an hour, but I took it. I didn't want to take a risk going to jail if my PO followed through on her threat. My shift went until 8 p.m., so I barely got home before the curfew call came on the phone checking that I was home. Such a tight schedule left no time

to get in trouble, but it was rough. The pay was terrible, too. I figured that after the tax deduction I would take home only about $120 a week. Heck, I could make that much in an hour at the trap. What was I doing, anyway?

Nevertheless, when I walked into my PO's office for our second meeting, I felt pretty proud. I had a job, had made my curfews, and had attended all three Winning Circle meetings so far.

"Good morning, Mr. Jackson." She actually smiled at me. "Glad you're on time. Here. Take this little cup and go across the hall to the restroom and give me a urine sample. We're doing a drug test today."

My face must have shown my surprise, because she laughed. "Rule number one, remember? No drugs!" She sniffed the air a couple of times. "You haven't been smoking marijuana, have you?"

My head was swirling. Could a urine sample show if I'd been smoking? Could she smell it? What should I do? "Listen Ms. Sherry, I'm going to be honest with you. It's true; I have been smoking weed. It's been hard, really hard. I know you told me no drugs, but I thought that meant crack. And I haven't touched that at all. No hard stuff. But it's been hard to stop smoking. Know what I'm sayin'? I've been smoking so long and …" I could see her eyes getting harder. "Well, yeah I've still been smoking. But I'll try and stop. I swear."

She sat there staring at me as if she could read my soul. Finally, she said, "Give me back the cup. But next time you

come in here I will test you, so you better be clean, ’cause those tests don’t lie.”

I hardly heard anything else she said that day. All I could think about was that I had just ducked a bullet. I went home determined to quit the weed, but that very evening when my dad offered me a blunt, I smoked it. I figured I had plenty of time to get clean, so why not just one more.

I’d promised myself I wouldn’t spend any more time at the trap. If I hung with those dudes, I knew I’d be back slingin’ … and usin’. But what would one more visit with the old crew matter? Besides, I needed some advice. So the next day I stopped by the Circle-K—right on the Gwinnett County line—before I went to work. There were lots of highfives and “Where you been, bro?” It was tempting to dig in again. These guys were family, much more so than my own blood. But I knew I couldn’t stay or I’d end up in jail. Still, I had my question: “Any of you guys know how to clear the stuff outta your system so a urine test won’t show you been smokin’ weed?”

“No problem,” said Chachi. “It’s THC that makes you high. But it’s easy to beat a urine test. All you gotta do is eat a lot of red meat three days before the test and drink lots of water—I mean like gallons—for twenty-four hours before and, of course, don’t smoke that day.”

“What’s with the red meat?”

“Boosts your creatinine levels so they won’t know you’ve diluted your urine by drinking the water. Simple as that.”

“How you know all that crap?” Chachi laughed. “Just call me Doc.” Cool! I had nothing to worry about.

* * * *

One morning I went to the mall to get a new shirt, proud that I was actually going to pay for it that day. Some girls were outside the Verizon cell phone store dissin’ everyone who passed, giggling and making fun. For some reason I went up to the cutest one. “Why are you trash talkin’ all these people? You don’t know any of them.”

She laughed. “I could talk bad about you, too, you know.”

“Wouldn’t be hard, but why?”

She shrugged. “What’s your name?” “Damien. What’s yours?”

Janice ended up giving me her cell number, home phone number, and her grandmother’s number. We talked so long I didn’t have time to buy a shirt before I had to go to work.

That night I called her after work, and we talked for hours. She invited me to come by her house the next day, which worked out just fine because it was kind of on the way. I left home early and caught the bus to her house, hung out until time to go to work, and then headed to KFC. It made my shift go much faster.

After that, I called her every night and dropped by her house two or three times a week. She understood my struggles because she had issues with her family, too. She became the best thing in my world, so much so that on my

birthday I bought her a gift, some pants that cost almost ninety dollars. That was Tuesday, one of my days off, so we talked all afternoon until I suddenly realized what time it was. I ran out of her house and caught the bus, but I ended up being late for the first time to my Winning Circle class.

One strike against me, and I really got yelled at, too. But I didn't care. It was worth it being with Janice all afternoon.

* * * *

Three days before my next appointment with my PO, I stopped eating free chicken at KFC and stuffed myself on Whoppers and Double Quarter Pounders, trying to get all the beef in me I could. I also cut back on smoking weed, though I had to have a few hits on the way to work just to cope. But the day before my meeting, I didn't smoke at all. Instead, I started chugging water like the city filtration plant. I went to my meeting feeling confident.

First thing Ms. Holmes did was hand me the little cup and send me across the hall to provide a sample. When I came back, she had me drop it in a baggy with my name on it and sent it to the lab.

"So, how are things going? You still got your job?"

I knew she knew the answer because my boss had received a call from her earlier that week. "Yeah, I still got it. It's going pretty well. I'm doing a good job, and they like me there. But there's one issue, maybe you could help me with."

“And what would that be?”

“Well, it takes almost an hour to get to work and back—two buses each way—and my shift doesn’t end until eight. So, I was wondering if you could cut me a little slack and move my curfew back … say until ten.”

She flipped through a couple of pages in my file. “Looks like you’ve been able to make it every night when the call comes, though. So why do you need an extension?”

I gritted my teeth. What was with this hardnosed woman? Sure I’d made it, but didn’t that earn me an adjustment? Still, I knew anger wouldn’t work. I needed to show how reasonable and responsible I was becoming. I put both palms together in front of me, not intending to look like I was praying to her, but … “It’s not that I can’t make it. It’s just that there’s no time to stop and get anything to eat or do any errands on the way home. Know what I’m sayin’?”

“They tell me you can get something to eat at work, and any errands could be done earlier in the day. Look, Damien, as far as you’re concerned, nothing good happens on the streets after dark. That’s why I want you home. So, for today, the answer’s no.” She looked up as a young woman came through the door and handed her some papers. “Ah, looks like your urine test is back.”

Ms. Holmes scowled at it a moment, then looked up frowning. “You’re still smoking marijuana, aren’t you, Damien?”

“Well no, not for a while. Not—”

She stood up and leaned over her desk and began yelling. “Don’t BS me? It says right here that your THC levels are significantly elevated.” She picked up her desk phone and punched in some numbers. “Send up a deputy. I’ve got a guest eager to try our beds.”

I done drunk barrels of liquor
Done smoked pounds of weed.
Went from quarters and swishers
To rollin o’s in leaves
And got sick with no mixer
’Cause I had ulcers that bled.
And done drunk cheaper liquor
Than Three Sisters and O. E.
And I chugged down Mad Dog …
Felt like a junkie feignin’, tryin’
To reach a higher peak.
I was a hopeless sinner
With a talent and a dream,
So unfortunate for me.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

“DON’T PLAY with me, Damien,” snapped my Probation Officer. “I’ve been treating you fair, more than fair. I even gave you grace by not locking you up last time. But you don’t seem to appreciate that. You think you can get over on me. Well, you can’t!”

I was stunned. This couldn’t be happening. But when the deputy arrived, he cuffed me.

“Get him out of here! And hey,” Ms. Holmes called as the deputy led me toward the door, “throw him in the Tank, not Juvie. He’s seventeen now! I want him behind bars … and I don’t care if you lose the keys!”

Downstairs, the deputy took my shoes, belt, and everything in my pockets as the desk sergeant processed me in. Then I sat all day in the Tank, shackled and cuffed, surrounded by several hard-eyed and scarred up dudes, wondering how long I’d be there. Would I be arraigned and get my “day in court”? Or was Ms. Holmes my judge and I’d already been sentenced?

Stupid! Stupid! Why did I think I could keep on smoking weed and not get found out? Why had I believed Chachi’s routine would purge the drug from my body? Slowly, I realized the truth: I’d believed Chachi because I wanted to believe him and hadn’t yet decided to do what I’d been told to do. Well, when I got out this time, I would definitely stop smoking weed! For sure!

Ms. Holmes had been so angry, I expected to be left in jail for a week or two at the very least. That evening a guard came down the hall, raking his baton along the bars. “Damien Jackson?”

“Yeah.” I stood up.

A buzzer sounded and the gate rolled back. “Let’s go,”

he said.

I moved hesitantly, not just because of the shackles on my ankles, but because I didn’t know what was happening.

“Come on! Come on, unless you want to stay here all night.”

I moved a little faster, glad to get out of the Tank. Maybe I would get a bed and a cell without so many crazies, and—hopefully—get the shackles and cuffs removed. As soon as the gate closed behind us, the guard obliged and took off my restraints, and I followed him more freely down the hall where we were buzzed through another locked door. He pointed me to the desk where I’d been processed, and to my surprise the desk sergeant handed me my shoes, belt, and a large envelope with my money, cell phone, and keys. “Check the contents and sign this paper affirming everything has been returned.”

What? What was happening?

He shoved another sheet of paper at me. “Here’s your release. Report to your PO next month. Time and date’s on the paper.”

I looked around. The guard had gone back into the jail and the door had buzzed closed. “You mean I can go now?”

“You might want to put your shoes on first.”

* * * *

When I got back to my dad’s motel, I didn’t smoke any weed … for the first time in I don’t know how many years. In fact, I didn’t smoke even one joint the whole next month, and every day I drank two or three extra glasses of water hoping to flush every trace of marijuana out of my body.

But water was not all I drank. I still felt I needed “a little help from my friends,” and alcohol had already become a way to deaden the pain of a life I so often found intolerable, especially living with my dad.

He’d taken to telling me two or three times a week, “Listen, Damien, tonight you’re not going to be able to come straight home. Find something to do ’til I give you a call ’cause I’m going to have company.”

I knew what that was all about. “But what about my curfew? What happens if they call?”

“Don’t sweat it. I’ll just tell them you’re back. That’s all they want to know.”

If I caught the right bus after work, I’d get home at 8:50 or 8:55 and be there to answer my curfew calls, though they didn’t always call. If I was a little late, and no call came, I’d been counting myself lucky. But had Dad been covering for me, saying I was home even if I hadn’t gotten in yet? That

was cool, but it burned me to think he was now using the same technique to pursue his own pleasures over my need to stay out of jail. What if Ms. Holmes came by to check? Or what if something happened—something where I was completely innocent—but the cops took my name while I was still out?

It reinforced my deep-seated feeling that I wasn't really wanted by my own family. Since I couldn't use drugs to deaden the pain, I began drinking more and more. Bacardi Spiced rum or vodka or Captain Morgan rum were my favorites. I went from drinking a pint every day to two pints a day. Then I realized it was cheaper to buy it in half gallons, but more availability led to greater consumption until I was going through one of those in a day or two. I started drinking in the morning, while I was riding the bus to work I drank some more, and I even grabbed nips on the job. I did this by mixing rum with Coke in a large Coke bottle. I kept myself right at the edge—a little buzz, a little fog—but still functional. At night I'd talk on the phone to Janice for hours while I drank myself to sleep. On my days off, we'd get together, but I still kept on drinking.

Nevertheless, by the next meeting with my PO I had finished my Winning Circle classes, remained gainfully employed (well, as "gainful" as minimum wage can be), I had paid off all my fines, and I hadn't been caught violating curfew.

Ms. Holmes looked up when I came in and handed me the cup without even saying hello. After I came back with my urine sample, she still didn't speak to me. All she did was

send the sample to the lab and point me to a chair to wait while she continued her paperwork. I got the message: If I didn't pass this drug test, there wouldn't be anything more to talk about. She'd be through with me.

When the clerk brought back the report, Ms. Holmes scanned it quickly and glanced up at me. She studied it again more carefully. "Well, Damien. This looks good." She nodded, and for the first time I saw a genuine smile soften her face. "I'm glad to see this. And …" She shuffled through my file. "… looks like you're doing well in the other categories, too. Does this mean you have decided to reform?"

I leaned back in my chair, laced my fingers together across my chest, and smiled. "Yep. I learned my lesson. That's for sure. No more drugs. No more dealin'. Got a straight job and intend to keep it that way. I'm one of your success stories." I laid it on thick, but I meant it … at least I thought I did.

We talked for another half hour, partly her asking me how life was going—I didn't say anything about Dad—and partly her lecturing me about how life should go. But I didn't mind. The ax wasn't hanging over my head anymore, and that's all that mattered to me.

And, in his own way, I suppose my dad was trying to get along with me. For Christmas he finally gave me something better than a plastic spinning top. Derrick was over when Dad announced, "Merry Christmas, boys," and handed me a half-gallon of Captain Morgan rum and Derrick a little gift bag full of weed and some blunts.

We acted grateful, and I guess I was, but later I got to thinking: Here I was only seventeen, well under the legal drinking age, but my dad had given me a half-gallon of rum—actually, he'd been the one buying it for me all along, but giving it to me as a gift somehow seemed like a worse encouragement. And he'd given my brother a gift that could land him in jail if he were caught. What kind of a father was that?

I just drank the rum and moved on. What else could I do?

* * * *

Tensions with Dad—especially when he kicked me out so he could have his little "love" trysts—made me want to stay away as often as possible. Derrick and I sometimes went over to our cousin Mike's house. He wanted to become our music manager, and he always had some new gig to discuss with us. He also had a couple of roommates, white guys who were heavily into rock and roll, and though Derrick and I were mostly rappers, we'd still jam together with them sometimes.

We'd been hanging out there off and on for a couple of weeks when we came by one day and the three of them were gone. No problem. The door was open and we went in and made ourselves at home. Except we made ourselves a little too much at home, opening cabinets and rummaging through personal stuff. In the back of one of the guy's drawers I found a cigar box with nearly three thousand dollars cash in it.

Derrick and I looked at each other. “You think it’s drug money?” I asked.

He shrugged. “Where else would anyone get that much cash? If it were legit, it’d be in the bank or a check or something.” Derrick counted it again. “If it’s drug money, they can’t call the cops.”

“Whaddaya mean?”

“If it turns up missin’, what can they do?” “They can kill us, that’s what.”

“Nah! How would they know it was us? They leave the door unlocked all the time. Anyone could come in here and take it. Only the cops could do an investigation and come up with fingerprints and other evidence that might point to us.”

“Yeah, but they’d know.”

“Not necessarily, not if we don’t flash it around. Besides they’re all peace and love, just a couple hippie musicians, ya know. They won’t do nothin’.”

I hesitated. “I dunno, Derrick. We’re musicians, ain’t we, and we’d pop anyone who stole three grand from us.”

My brother looked at me, determination in his eyes. “I need this, bro.”

“Oh yeah.” I rolled my eyes. “Doesn’t everybody?”

“No, no. You don’t understand. Cheyan and I got put out of her mom’s place yesterday, so we don’t have any place to

live. I’m on the street with a pregnant wife and a baby. But with this, we could get a room…. We could get one at the Suburban Lodge where you are. That way when Dad won’t let you in, you could come over to our place.”

Suddenly, that money seemed like the answer to one of my biggest irritations in life, and the sure way to keep myself out of jail by not missing curfew.

I nodded, and we walked out of there with the money.

Cousin Mike’s buddies were no fools. Right from the start, they figured Derrick and I were the thieves who’d stolen their money. We were the only guys who’d been going in and out of their place. If they’d been gangbangers, they’d have probably killed us in a blink. Instead, they yelled and accused us and threatened to beat it out of us, but we just stood our ground, denying the whole thing. “Wasn’t us.” “Must’ve been someone else who broke in.” “Why don’t you call the cops?”

We were right. They weren’t about to do the cops. But in the end, they kicked Mike out because they were so sure we’d done it, and he couldn’t get their money back for them. I think Mike believed we’d done it, too, because that ended our relationship for years. Word spread to other family members, confirming what many of them already thought: We were just no-good thugs. Taking that money seriously burned some bridges.

* * * *

Three weeks later at my seven-month check-in with my Probation Officer, I got a surprise. I'd passed every drug test since that third one and had done everything else Ms. Holmes had required. We'd even become friends in a strange sort of way. But I wasn't prepared when she said, "Damien, you've done so well, you've turned things around so completely in your life, I'm gonna give you early termination."

Termination? Isn't that what Arnold Schwarzenegger did … terminate people? Was she going to terminate my probation? End my freedom? How had she found out about the money we stole from Mike's roommates? But she was still smiling, and then it struck me: She wasn't talking about throwing me in jail. She was going to let me off probation after I'd barely done a quarter of my time.

Wow!

She signed my papers, shook my hand, and I walked out of there a free man, my head still swirling from the grace I certainly didn't deserve … especially given the crime I'd recently committed.

* * * *

The first thing I did to celebrate was light up a blunt and move out of my dad's room to move in with Janice. Her mother didn't like it one bit when I rang the bell with a duffle bag over my shoulder, but I kept saying it was no big deal. My brother and Cheyan had lived with her mom for a while. "This is a new day. So, come on. Don't be so old fashioned."

“See? That’s what I mean. You don’t got no sense of morals ’bout you. At least your brother was married.”

“Well, if that’s what’s bothering you, I’ll sleep on the couch or something. I can’t keep on staying with my dad in that one-room dump at the Suburban Lodge … especially given his lifestyle,” I added, trying to make myself sound “moral,” if that’s what worried her. “So come on, just for a while until I get a place of my own.”

She finally agreed to a “short stay” provided I didn’t sleep in the same bedroom with Janice.

But a couple of weeks later, she caught me sleeping with Janice, and I was driven out of there with a tongue-lashing that could have skinned a ’gater. I made my way back to the Suburban Lodge like a dog with its tail between its legs.

To my surprise, Dad was gone. He had moved to Woodhaven Apartments on Brockett Trail. Though Woodhaven was still one of those cheap complexes catering to people on the margin of financial security, Dad’s unit was a real apartment with a living room, kitchen, bathroom, and two bedrooms. Why didn’t he do this before I moved out? We might have made it together if we’d had enough space not to be in each other’s face all the time.

Ha! He probably didn’t get a nicer place before I left, because then I wouldn’t have left!

Believing that Dad didn’t want me living with him—probably never had—I stayed in Derrick and Cheyan’s room at the Suburban Lodge … or any place I could crash.

Sometimes Janice stayed over, too. But it seemed we fought more and more.

Somehow taking that money from Mike's friends had knocked me back even though I was off probation and had a second chance at life. My "celebration blunt" lit up a constant cloud of dope, day after day. Earlier I'd imagined I was beyond drugs, but I was right back to them, full blown

... along with continuing serious alcohol consumption. It seemed I had no real strength of my own to do what I knew was right. How far down would I go? Would I soon be dealing again, using crack? Would I end up dead or in prison?

I needed help. I'd made a promise to God ... but I hadn't been able to keep it.

Almighty, catch me.
Help me stand on my two feet.
These days it’s so hard to defeat.
The stress on my chest
Feels like weights in the sea.
I gives it my best,
Yet I drown in the deep.
Profound when I speak,
So the system repeats,
Anotha brotha locked up,
Drugged up, he stays weak.
Then back on the streets
I live a different life,
But it’s to the same beat.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

BACK WHEN I'd been only seven years old, Dad sat us kids down, opened the Bible, and told us the story of Jesus— how He'd been born of God and the Virgin Mary, how He'd preached about God's love and the way to life, and how He'd died for our sins. Dad must've spent an hour or two going through the whole thing that day. He ended by saying we needed to accept Jesus if we wanted to be saved from hell. Of course, we wanted to "be saved." What little kid wouldn't? So we said yes.

After that, Dad took us to church from time to time, to a big, glitzy church with lots of programs. I liked it, but when the preacher said something to my dad—probably about his lifestyle—we stopped going.

For years, I pretty much forgot about God. When the subject of God or Jesus came up—in any context other than swear words—most people around me spoke of them pretty much like Santa Claus, a nice story, but nothing more. And to me, our dad's hypocrisy certainly discredited anything he'd said about God when we were little.

Nevertheless, whenever I'd been in big trouble—when I was homeless, when someone was about to shoot me, when I'd been arrested, when everything seemed to be falling apart—I'd always cried out with some kind of a prayer for God's help. Maybe He was there. Maybe He would help. And again and again He had.

Now I felt in a similar desperate situation again, but I knew I had gone back on my promises to God more than once. Would He even listen anymore? I had to find out. I bought a Bible for $5.99 at the Dollar Store and started reading, hoping to find answers somewhere within it.

* * * *

Things were just too crowded for me to continue staying with Derrick and Cheyan and their kids in that small room at the Suburban Lodge, so I finally asked Dad if I could move back in with him, especially since he had a second bedroom. I offered to help with rent, and he finally agreed. With a room of my own, I invited Janice to join me, didn't even consult Dad, just brought Janice's stuff over and set up housekeeping and considered ourselves engaged.

Everything went okay for about a month, except that we were so far from Janice's school that she had to get up at five-thirty in the morning to make it to class on time. She didn't like having to wait for the bus in the dark because there had been a number of rapes and robberies in the neighborhood, so everyday she'd ask me if I'd walk her to the bus stop. I did a couple of times, but it didn't seem all that dangerous, and it was really hard to get up so early.

When I'd refuse, she'd give me a dirty look and stomp out of the apartment. I knew she thought it was because I didn't love her enough, and that would make me feel guilty. I'd lie in the bed telling myself that tomorrow … tomorrow I'd go with her. But the next day it would seem just too hard to get up, and I'd say, "What for? You can walk by yourself. You're a big girl." Sometimes I'd console myself that I was on my

feet for hours at KFC, so I needed my rest. But I knew that was a lame excuse.

Of course, I didn't want to stay at KFC. And neither Derrick nor I wanted to go back to dealing drugs, so we were looking for something with more of a future in it. But what?

Music!

We'd have to get serious about our music! There was a big music-industry-sponsored event coming up, a "Can I Live" celebrity weekend—supposedly by invitation only. We grabbed our demo tapes and a boom box and headed for it.

They wouldn't let us in, but we spent three days standing out front accosting every artist who walked by: "Hey man. Listen to this! Listen to this! Just give us a minute, man. You'll love it! Hey … hey, come on?" We'd press play on the boom box to start the back up beat, then rap our souls out. Sometimes it worked, and the artist would stop and listen, maybe compliment our music or at least our determination. And when we were really lucky, one of them would give us a business card or a personal phone number.

On the second day we crashed the gate and got in past the guards. We weren't going to let anything stop us. We met Ludacris, a DJ for Atlanta's Hot 97.5 radio and one of the bestselling rappers in the country, and we got on a ta- lent show he sponsored. We also met Faski and Sean Haze who let us work with them and lay down a couple of tracks. They took our names and phone numbers and said they'd get back to us.

Wow! What a weekend! But would they call? Would this be our break? We hardly dared hope.

* * * *

While we were out trying to make connections for our music, Janice went home to stay with her mother for a few nights … at least that's what she told me. But I suspected she spent most of her time with her cousin, and I didn't like that because there were some guys who swarmed around her cousin's place like bees around flowers … all looking for a little nectar.

In addition, we'd spent so much time on our music that Derrick hadn't put in enough hours at Dial America— the telemarketing place where he worked—to pay the rent for their room at the Suburban Lodge, and they got put out and came begging to stay with Dad. What could he say? He couldn't refuse and consign his grandbabies to the streets. And what could I say? Janice wasn't there right then, so I let Derrick and Cheyan use our room while I slept on the couch in the living room.

But when Janice came back, she took one look at the room with different stuff scattered all around and babies crying on the floor. "What's going on in here? What you doin' on my bed?" she yelled at Cheyan. "Wake up! Get outta my bed! Where's Derrick?"

Janice came out of the room and lit into me. "What's goin' on?"

"They needed a place to stay."

“Not here, they don’t. Not if you want me around.” “Come on, Janice. Think of the babies. We couldn’t leave

them out in the street. Just calm down.” I reached out and

touched her shoulders.

“Don’t touch me!” She jerked away. “And don’t tell me to calm down! You can’t make me calm down. This is crazy. I’m getting’ outta here.”

“No you’re not. You’re gonna stay right here.”

“Oh yeah? How you gonna make me? You can’t keep me here! You ain’t gonna do nothin’!”

It took me half an hour to settle her down.

Dad was as mad as a wet tomcat at all the yelling. He’d moved into this apartment to find some peace and quiet, but it was gone now, that was for sure. Over the next couple days he kept threatening to call child welfare. Probably the only thing that saved us was the probability that he’d have been in line for some consequences, too, if he called.

We were all at each other’s throats. Derrick kept after me and Janice. “You know you guys are livin’ in sin, don’t you. You’re sleepin’ together, but you ain’t married.”

“So, what’s the big deal? Never bothered you before.” “The big deal is, it ain’t right. Doesn’t the Bible say somethin’ ’bout that?”

“What difference does it make to you?”

We kept at it until we started pushing each other. Then we started throwing punches while the babies screamed. Derrick grabbed me and pushed my head through the window—glass flew everywhere. I came back on him with a fury and threw him down on a mirror that also broke.

Suddenly, something stopped us—perhaps the realization that either of us could've been seriously hurt. We didn't say anything. Derrick picked up one of the screaming babies, and I went out for a walk.

What was happening? This was more pressure than I'd experienced at the trap when things were so crazy. I was trying to get my life straightened out, I was trying to do right, but I'd just gone from one kind of chaos to another kind.

It seemed like the only time there was any peace was when we were all high or drunk, and so we did a lot of that, more and more every day. Somewhere along the way, Derrick had also picked up a Bible, and when we were high, we'd try to read it, imagining the weed helped us concentrate. We'd be wowed by strange details from the Book of Revelation or something, but we weren't learning anything about improv- ing our lives or how to establish a relationship with God.

* * * *

A few days later my phone rang. Faski and Sean Haze—the guys we'd recorded some raps with after the "Can I Live" weekend—said they were calling, not for themselves, but because they'd played our raps for Lisa "Left Eye"

Lopes, an internationally popular singer, songwriter, and teen idol. And she wanted to meet us.

If Faski and Sean Haze were the moon, Lisa Lopes was the stars! Officially she got the nickname “Left Eye” from a boyfriend who noticed that her left eye appeared slightly larger than her right, but most fans believed it was because early in her career she wore a pair of glasses with a condom in place of the left lens in order to promote safe sex. To meet with such a star, we raced to her place at the speed of light. She wanted to hear us in person, and she liked what she heard. “I want you guys to start working with Lorenzo, my producer. I think we’ve got a future together.” We were ready to go and ended up laying down six or seven songs. While this was going on, we became personal friends with Lisa and often spent long periods of time at her palatial house.

Almost unbelievably to Derrick and me, she also stopped by our ratty little apartment quite often. She would drive up in her fancy white Navigator and hang with us, smoking weed and working on raps. It made Janice jealous, but I didn’t care. If she was going to see those guys over at her cousin’s place, then she needed to cut me some slack, too. But the day Lisa invited Derrick and me to travel down to Honduras with her to see the educational center her foundation was setting up for neglected and abandoned children, Janice nearly erupted like a volcano.

“What’s this, Damien? Every time I turn around, it is Lisa this, Lisa that. You got a thing for her, and now you’re going

on a trip with her—several days alone, out of the country even? I don't need this! I'm going back to Mom's!"

"Yeah, well I don't have a thing for Lisa. This is business. She's the best chance we got, and she likes us. And I ain't gonna let this chance get away. So run on back to Mama if you want. But just stay away from your cousin's place."

"My cousin? What's she got to do with anything? You ain't got nothin' to say about her!"

I shrugged. It wasn't her cousin. It was the guys who hung out at her place. But what could I say? I was determined to go to Honduras with Lisa.

Nothing happened on the trip, at least not anything Janice needed to worry about. Mostly we melted in the heat and got eaten by mosquitoes. But not long after we got back, Lorenzo, Lisa's producer, fell into some kind of depression and totally quit the music business.

Where did that leave us? Without a producer again.

Janice didn't come back when I got home from Honduras. In fact, for three days she wouldn't even answer my phone calls, and that worried me. But it also made me mad. So when my mom came by one afternoon and said she needed a place to crash for the night, I didn't object when Dad threw up his hands and said, "Whatever," even though that meant I'd be sleeping on the floor. And I doubted it would be just one night. Not having a place to sleep would be what Janice deserved for not coming back when she promised and not even answering when I phoned her.

Mom thanked Dad and left. But when she returned about

10 p.m., she had a friend with her: Elgin, a drug dealer Derrick and I had done business with when we worked the trap. We'd never liked him then, and we liked him even less now. He was only twenty-three—about Derrick's age—but the idea that he and Mom were "an item" blew us away. We hated him for it, especially knowing he and she might be having sex right there with us around.

Of course, they didn't leave the next morning. There were "reasons" and "complications." Plans fell through, and they needed a couple more nights. A couple more nights that would turn into what? … weeks? months?

When Janice finally came back to the apartment, she didn't go ballistic that Mom and Elgin were sleeping on our couch, leaving us with nothing but the floor. She just looked around and started to cry quietly. "Damien, do you realize there are nine people living in this place? Nine people? It's never gonna work."

Something had happened. Something had taken the fire out of her. It was as though she didn't believe she deserved anything better, but that wasn't like Janice. She'd been the one to lift me up. She changed me and made me believe there was something beautiful in life again when I'd come so close to offing myself. Now here she was acting as though she didn't deserve anything more than sleeping on the floor in a place crowded with nine people. All she could do was cry about how sorry our situation had become.

Father forgive me, I was a liar and
a thief before
I robbed and fought, and cheated,
for my yeast to grow.
I used to swig the liquor ’til
my speech was slow.
And man, my feet would stumble ’fore
I reached the door.
Y’all need to know the real.
I don’t speak to gloat. I once clutched the steel,
Cocked it back, and well … you know the rest.
Ain’t no need for descriptions here.
I don’t contest. I done did a lot of wickedness, yeah.
I know the best got a story, if you lend them your ear.
The most elect could have been a killa back in his years.
The puzzle ain’t clear ’til after all the pieces are there.
The God that I serve can turn a monster, humble and dear.

So just don’t judge the book, cause the cover you fear.
We fumblin’ near the ending. Toward the coming of Him,
The One who can save the sinners if they truly repent,
The One who can change the finish if you choose to
commit.

CHAPTER TWENTY

IT DIDN'T take long for Janice's spitfire mouth to return, and it quickly burned away any concern I might have had that something had quashed her spirit. As usual, when she lit into me over not having any money for her to buy some new shoes, I got defensive and argued back. "You eat here, too. You smoke up all the dope, but you don't contribute nothing. So just shut up!"

Nevertheless, I quit my job at KFC and got a job as a telemarketer at Dial America where Derrick worked. It paid better money, and with my first paycheck, I did give her money for shoes, but most of it still went for weed and alcohol. Making more money didn't ease our tensions. It just gave me the excuse to start taking more advantage of Janice. One day when I came home from work, there wasn't any food in the place, so I told her to go out and get us something to eat.

"Who you talkin' to? Who you think you are? You don't be bossin' me 'round. Nobody tells me what to do."

"I don't see you payin' for anything 'round here. Now go buy somethin' to eat."

"With what? I ain't got no money."

I shoved her toward the door. "Then go get something from your momma's house. We wouldn't even be living in this dump if she'd let us stay with her."

Janice was gone for hours. I assumed she was mad and was just walking it off, but long after dark my cell rang. Janice said she was at the bus stop, a ten or fifteen minute walk away. “Damien, I got a big bag of food, but it’s too heavy for me to carry. Could you come help me?”

“What?” I’d been smoking so much weed that night, I couldn’t even track on what she’d said.

“I said, this stuff’s too heavy. Come help me, please.” Her request was polite enough, but her tone had an attitude.

“What’s the matter with you, woman? You think I’m your step-’n-fetch-it? Get your butt back here and fix me something to eat. I’m starvin’.” I tried to shake the cobwebs out of my head and hung up on her.

Twenty minutes later she came in with a huge garbage bag filled with a gallon of milk, cans of food, bread, frozen pizza, a bag of potatoes, and I don’t know what else.

“Where’d you get all that?”

“From my mom’s. She wasn’t home, but when she finds out, there’s gonna be hell to pay.”

“Serves her right. Now fix me something to eat.” I went back to smoking more weed, and fell asleep on the couch.

I awoke about two in the morning to see a plate of pizza and a cup of Bacardi on the floor beside me. Janice was sleeping in the recliner at the end of the couch. I kicked her foot. “Hey, why didn’t you wake me up?”

“I tried.”

“Yeah, but you didn’t.”

In the morning, she didn’t even ask me to walk her to the bus stop, or if she did, I didn’t even know it, I was so wasted. I didn’t go to work that day … didn’t even call in. But by the time Janice got home in the afternoon, I was feeling so bad about how I’d treated her, that I was writing a rap about it while I smoked weed. Elgin was sitting on the couch on the other side of the room watching TV, so Janice sat down at the table with me and took a hit off my blunt as though nothing had happened the night before.

“So you writin’ another song for your girl, Left Eye?”

At first I didn’t catch her drift. “Well, yeah. She might like this. Whadda you think?” And I lined it out for her.

“I think it sucks. You care more about her than you do about me. You’re always going over there, but you never do anything for me.”

By then I knew what she was saying, but instead of trying to smooth the waters by showing her the rap was really about her, I crumpled up the paper and threw it toward the trash. “Whaddaya mean, I never do anything for you? You’re smokin’ my weed right now, aren’t you? You’re stayin’ in my place, you’re eatin’ my food. You go out and get something for a change.”

She flipped me off and got up. “Make me!”

I jumped up and grabbed her as she walked away and threw her down on the floor. “What did you say? Do you know who you’re talking to, girl?” Without realizing it, I had my hands around her throat and was squeezing. “I said, who you think you’re talkin’ to?”

She coughed and gagged as she tried to suck air. I squeezed harder and bounced her head up and down on the floor, rage coursing through my body. She fought harder, and I squeezed harder until she suddenly went limp.

I let go and pulled back. What had I done? Panic replaced my anger. Had I killed her?

After a long moment, she started coughing and rolled over onto her hands and knees. I stood up and backed away, horrified. I’d never touched a woman in anger before. As crazy as our family was, that was something none of us Jackson men ever did. What had come over me?

Janice remained on her hands and knees panting to get her breath. Then she stood up and went into Derrick and Cheyan’s room. I went over to the sink to get a glass of water to clear my head.

Suddenly Elgin shouted, “No!” And I turned just in time to see him grab Janice’s arm to keep her from swinging a heavy pole like a baseball bat toward my head. Her face was twisted in rage, and she was breathing as hard as a steam engine.

“Let me go!” She jerked herself free from Elgin and stomped out the door.

* * * *

I lost my job from Dial America the next day. The boss said I'd become too unreliable, even though I had one of the best call records.

I didn't see Janice for a week. When she returned it was only to pick up a few of her things. I begged her to forgive me. "Don't leave me, Babe. I'm really sorry. It'll never happen again, I swear. Please, Babe! That wasn't me."

She stopped bustling around—grabbing pieces of clothes, a couple of schoolbooks, and looking under our sleeping mat and behind chairs—and stared at me as though I was nothing more than an echo from her distant past. "It wasn't what you used to be, Damien, but it's what you've become. You love your weed and your drink more than you love me. You love it more than anything, more than life itself. You're killing yourself, and you don't even know it." She headed for the door.

"Wait! Wait! Where'll you go?" She shrugged and walked out.

I figured she'd go back to her mom, and I knew I had to give her some space, but I was hurt at her going under those circumstances. I didn't want to lose her. I thought she was the most important thing in the world to me. But she was right. Weed had taken her place. Weed had become my best friend, more important than my fiancée, more important than my job, and I'd almost ended up in prison because of it.

I'd have to cut back, get this thing under control.

* * * *

I got a new telemarketing job and had decided that I was going to go find Janice and ask her to return when late one Friday night I got a phone call from Black, a guy I'd been in the Winning Circle with while we were both on probation. "Hey, Damien, how you doin'?"

We exchanged small talk for a few minutes, then he said, "You know a girl named Janice?" When I said yes and we'd established that we were talking about the same Janice, he went on to say he was sorry to have to tell me that a couple of other guys had recently slept with her. When he overheard her say she was my girl, he felt bad and thought he owed it to me to tell me.

I was completely devastated. He said it had happened one of the times when she'd been over at her cousin's and then he told me the names of the guys. Beyond that I didn't want to know any more details. I hung up.

How could this happen? This couldn't be happening. Black must be playing a dirty trick on me. Why would he even tell me? It couldn't be true. I dialed Janice at her mother's place. "Janice, we gotta talk. I want you to come over first thing tomorrow morning. Will you do that?"

"What's the big deal? Why the urgency?" "I'll tell you when you get here."

I didn’t know if she’d come, but she showed up about ten in the morning. We didn’t hug or anything. I just said, “Come with me,” and led her out behind the apartment to a bench along a path in the woods where we sat down.

“So, what’s up?”

“I think you know what this is about, Janice.”

She looked down and didn’t answer. I rolled a joint and shared it with her. Then I said, “I want you to tell me the truth, Janice. Did you sleep with some guys over at your cousins?”

Tears came into her eyes, and I knew the answer was yes even before she nodded her head.

We both cried for a while, but the more I cried, the more I broke down and ended up balling like a baby. I didn’t care what I looked like. I was devastated. I’d never been hurt like this before. Finally, I said, “I loved you, Janice. I wanted to marry you. How could you do this?”

Deep down, I knew this was my fault, that I’d driven her away from me, that I didn’t know how to really love someone. But still, she was the one who’d been unfaithful. And as we sat there, that fact kept eating at me until I got more and more angry. Why? Why? Why had she done this to me? I felt the rage growing up in me like the day I’d choked her, and that scared me. “I think you better go back to your mom’s place now. We’ll work on this some other time.”

She left, and I went inside to drown my grief and anger with Captain Morgan and another blunt.

* * * *

The next week, Dad announced he was moving out. He'd found a job in New York and was through with this place! "And no, the rent hasn't been paid. Fact is, I think it's a couple of months behind. But, hey, I figure y'all are a big enough crowd to come up with the scratch if you want. And if not, that's on you. I'm outta here!"

It was the same way he'd bailed from the Four Seasons apartment. But I couldn't blame him. Things had truly gotten out of control.

Once he was out the door, the rest of us had a big fight over who would get his bedroom. I finally won out, claiming Janice would come back as soon as she didn't have to sleep on the floor, and we were more permanent than Mom and Elgin, who were only there "for a couple days." Besides, they hadn't contributed a penny for the rent while I had sometimes thrown in some cash.

Claiming Janice would come back as soon as we had a place to sleep caused me to do something about getting her back. Time had helped me accept more fully my responsibility and it gave me time to reflect on how much I loved her. I thought she was the most beautiful girl in the world, and though the hurt was still there, I really wanted her back. So I headed over to her mom's place. She seemed in bad shape. I knew the two of them fought all the time,

but Janice seemed worse than that. She seemed beat down, like a dog with all its spirit whipped out of it.

“Hey, Babe. I got a new job a couple of weeks ago—pays better—and I’ve been cutting back on the dope. Whaddya say, you willing to give me another try?”

She hung her head, shaking it slightly as she studied the floor. “I think the question is, are you willing to give me another chance?”

“Ah, Janice, you know I’ve always loved you. I want to marry you. We’ll get on our feet and get a place of our own. It’ll be better. You’ll see. And … and I’m here to ask you a thousand times to forgive me. I promise, I’ll never touch you in anger again. For real.”

She looked up at me like she could almost believe me. “And hey, Dad’s moved out, so we got his room.”

She smiled and nodded her head.

I drew her close to me. “Let’s forget the past and make a new start, huh?”

I took her back to the Woodhaven apartment only to discover that the management had delivered the second eviction notice. We were over two thousand bucks behind in the rent.

Oh, thanks, Dad!

Don’t rely on your hustle.
Find a better way to rise.
If you try and you stumble,
Just keep reachin’ for the sky.
I know life is a tussle,
But we all must survive.
Bro, don’t end up in that puddle
Full of Niggaz that done died.

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

SEEING THAT everything seemed to be falling apart, Mom and her boyfriend left and moved north to Flint, Michigan, where Elgin used to live. Derrick and I, however, decided to stay put. It seemed easier than scraping together the money to find a new place.

Lisa “Left Eye” Lopes was there the day that someone came banging on the door as loud as if they were trying to break into a burning building. I answered it with a “Yeah?”

The man held up his state marshal’s badge. “Are you Darnell Jackson?”

“No. He’s not here anymore. He moved to New York.” “Then what are you doing in this unit?”

“He’s my dad. He rented it. I’m Damien Jackson.”

“No matter.” He handed me an envelope. “You’ve been served with a notice to appear in Dispossessory Court.” Apparently seeing the bewilderment on my face, he added in a more sympathetic tone. “Look, if you don’t show up in court, or if the judge rules against you, we’ll have to come back and physically evict you. That means, an eviction company will throw everything you own out into the street.”

“Yeah, yeah. Been through all that before.”

“Then you might think about moving out on your own before then.”

I nodded, and he left.

“What was that all about?” Lisa asked.

“Ah, my dad wasn’t paying the rent, so they’re gonna evict us.” I shrugged. “We’re so far behind now there’s no way we can catch up.”

“How far?”

I shrugged. “Over two thousand or something. Doesn’t matter. No way we can come up with it.”

“I’ll cover it for you.”

What? What had she said? I glanced over at Janice, who was curled up on the couch. She still didn’t like Lisa hanging around so much, and I saw her roll her eyes, as though this was the last straw.

I turned back to Lisa. “What did you just say?”

“I said I’d cover the rent for you. I like you guys. I like having a place I can come and not be bothered by all those creeps who hang around me at the studio. Look, Damien, the music business is great, but some of those people get on my last nerve. Know what I’m sayin’?”

Before she left that day, Lisa wrote us a check for three thousand dollars, enough to cover the rent plus a little more. “Just consider it an advance on some of the hits we’re gonna make together,” she said as she handed it to me.

But we never got to make those hit songs with Lisa because on one of her subsequent trips to Honduras to check on the work of her foundation, she had an accident while driving her Mitsubishi Montero Sport along a narrow highway. She was attempting to pass a truck when she encountered an oncoming vehicle. In order to avoid hitting it head on, she swerved off the road, causing her SUV to roll over several times and hit two trees. She was thrown out of the window, suffering fatal head injuries. None of the seven other people in the vehicle were seriously hurt.

* * * *

In spite of the fact that Lisa's gift got us out of the hole with the rent, neither Derrick nor I were prepared to accept responsibility for keeping a budget and paying our bills on time, so by the next time the rent was due we came up short again. And once we were behind one month, it was harder to scrape together enough money to pay for two months. No matter how hard we worked at our telemarketing jobs, our weed and alcohol seemed to get paid for first.

Winter crept into my bones and my spirit. Still feeling disappointed about things with Janice and stressed out about money, I went over to a friend's house just wanting to get away from it all. It was mostly a place where I could just be alone, and I was out on his porch, smoking a blunt one evening when I started hearing singing in the distance. It was a beautiful song, and I finally figured out that it was coming from a little church up on the hill. So I walked up there, slipped in the door, and sat in the back. I knew I

smelled like weed and looked like hell, but something kept me there even though I was sure they would judge me. I knew I needed help. None of the things I'd tried to clean up my life had worked. Even though I wasn't dealing drugs or gangbanging any more, everything I touched seemed to turn sour.

I needed God's help, and the preacher was talking about God, the One who could help. When the preacher invited anyone who wanted to give their life to Christ to come to the front for prayer, I went and prayed with him. It felt good. For the first time I felt I was making contact with God.

Afterwards, I went back to my friend's house and sat on the porch thinking about what I'd done until it got too cold to stay outside. Maybe this was the beginning of something new. But by the next day back at work, I'd pretty much forgotten about it. In the weeks that followed, whenever that evening came to mind and I remembered how my heart had responded, I longed for that sense of freedom again, but I felt too embarrassed and guilty to go back to the church. My life hadn't really changed, and I was sure they'd judge me for it. After all, I judged myself for it. I felt like I'd let God down.

But it seemed as if God had let me down, too. Why would He let my life be so bad? I didn't ask to come into this world. Why had God allowed me to be the one everyone treated badly? Why hadn't my family loved me? Why was nobody there for me? At times like this, I would forget how God kept me from having to serve several years in prison and how many times He had preserved my life when I shoulda been

dead. It was just so easy to lose that focus when I was alone.

* * * *

The next time the marshal came banging on our door, he had the eviction company with him. But it was no surprise to us; we'd already received our "final" notice. The marshal came in with his gun drawn—guess the management had convinced him we were dangerous or something—and blustered, "What you doing here? You ain't supposed to be here. This place is supposed to be vacant." But seeing we were putting on our shoes and picking up our stuff, he calmed down and holstered his weapon. "I warned you guys. You know I could take you to jail for even being in here. Come on, hurry it up. You gotta go … now!"

Within an hour, everything we owned and couldn't carry was put out on the street in the drizzling rain where we tried to cover it with plastic garbage bags.

Janice went to stay with her mom. Cheyan and the kids went to stay with her mom. And Derrick and I moved in with our sister, May, down in College Park.

Janice's mom decided to move to Seattle and take Janice with her. I guess she saw this as an opportunity to get Janice away from me—something she had often tried to do. Janice called me the night before leaving, but I had this funny feeling when she told me about it. She asked what we were going to do, but I didn't get the feeling she was really opposed to the move. I suppose she was as tired of the chaos as any of us, and maybe this seemed like a way out.

“Don’t worry, Babe. Look, I’m gonna find a better job, and then I’m gonna rent an apartment just for us. Know what I’m sayin’? And when I do, I’ll send for you, okay?”

And I did find a better job—still in telemarketing, but it paid more. So did Derrick. In a few weeks I had enough money to go apartment hunting. I found one right downtown on the seventeenth floor of 710 Peachtree. My first apartment in my own name. I phoned Janice right away, excited to tell her about the gym, the restaurant, doctor’s offices, front door security with cameras and a doorman. “And it’s right next door to a nice little theater. Everything you could ever want, Babe. ’Course I couldn’t afford the whole thing by myself quite yet, so Derrick went in on it with me … just for now, that is.”

Janice was quiet for several moments. “I thought you said you were gonna to get a place for just the two of us.”

“Well, yeah. I tried, but rent in a place this nice is kind of high. But he and Cheyan are lookin’ to get a place of their own soon, too. It’ll be okay. We were able to get along with them okay before, don’tcha think?”

It took some talking, but she finally agreed to come as soon as I could wire her the money for bus fare, since there was no way her mother would spring for it.

Finally, Janice arrived. The apartment was technically a one-bedroom because the second bedroom didn’t have a closet, but we at least had a room of our own. Things were working out, and there was peace.

Then I found out that my mom was back in town living with a new boyfriend named Mike. One day on my way to work, I stopped by her place. I was only there about ten minutes and was about to leave when someone knocked on the door. I went to answer it, only to be confronted by the police, guns drawn as they stormed into the place. It was a drug bust because Mike was a dealer. In a moment they had me "assume the position" up against the wall as they searched me and peppered me with questions.

Fortunately, I didn't have anything on me that day, not even one single blunt. "Hey guys, look, I don't know anything about this. I don't live here. I was just on my way to work and stopped by to see my mom for a minute. I'm clean. I'm clean."

They checked out my story—where I lived, where I worked, and when I was due at work—and finally let me go.

Mom and Mike, on the other hand, spent about a week in jail and, of course, lost their apartment. When they got out, Mom had no place to go, so she came knocking at my door.

I shook my head. Oh man, I don't believe this. I really don't believe this! But what could I say? She was our mom. We let her in for "a couple of days," but of course she brought Mike, and a couple of days turned into an eternity. I was boiling with rage inside. How dare she do this to me again? And what was worse, she set herself to breaking up Janice and me.

And she did it by attacking and insulting me in front of Janice. Whenever there wasn't enough food in the house,

she would go into a fit, “You Niggaz ain’t worth what the elephants leave on the show grounds. You ought to have a better job than working telemarketing. What’s the matter with you? You’re dumb, that’s what! Just plain dumb! If you died today, I wouldn’t even care.” Then she’d turn to Janice. “I don’t know what you see in this trash! You know, I never wanted these brats. I wish I’d aborted ’em.”

Hearing my mom talk about me like that was worse than someone putting a gun to my head. I started dreading coming home from work, not knowing what I’d run into. I’d think back over my life—how she’d been so loving and kind when I was little and then had turned neglectful and finally mean, utterly mean. Where’d that come from? All I could think of was that it was some bad spirit she’d picked up from all the voodoo she’d been into. But thinking that something was the matter with her, that she was crazy or possessed by a demon, didn’t soften the hurt. I felt like someone had scooped out half my insides.

One day when I came home she said, “You know that girl of yours has been sleepin’ around. She knows you ain’t worth nothin’.”

I gritted my teeth. “Leave it alone, Mom. All that’s in the past.”

“Oh no it ain’t. She slept with some guys when she was in Seattle. You probably don’t even know ’bout that. Right?”

My mouth dropped open, then I shook my head. “No. No! That ain’t right. She came home as soon as I sent for her. If

she’d been messin’ around, she wouldn’t have come as soon as I called.”

“You’re so dumb, Damien. You don’t even know what’s up. She told me. She told me she was sleeping with other guys in Seattle.”

I never found out whether that was true or not. But she’d done it once before, and somehow Mom’s accusation pulled the plug on my trust level. Even though it was my mom—with all her meanness—who told me, I couldn’t get the possibility out of my head. And slowly, it ate away at my relationship with Janice.

Mom had succeeded! She’d driven a wedge between Janice and me, and that nearly killed me.

I … know they’d love to see me shy
Like they probably wanted Christ.
But did it stop Him when they spit down at
His feet and at His eye?
No. He still loved the people,
yet sometimes He had to cry.
And He died in that struggle that
made way for you and I
To try to fill His footsteps
—they fittin’ kinda fine,
But I wanna fit ’em better, ’cause I’m still
off in a nine.
And when He come back, I wanna be with
the brothaz on His side
So I can see the kingdom and the freedom
it provides.

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

I WAS coming home from work early one night and got off the MARTA at Five Point Station around 7:30 p.m. Normally, I would have ridden the commuter train for another couple stops closer to my apartment, but it was a nice evening, and I needed to clear my head with a walk. At first, discouragement dragged my feet as if I were walking through mud. I didn't know what I'd find when I got home. Janice and I were drifting apart. Derrick and I were fighting over money and bills all the time, and my mom kept sticking her nose into everything.

I was only wearing shorts and a T-shirt—one of the few perks of working a telemarketing job—and the air felt good, cool but you didn't get cold, warm but you didn't feel hot. A perfect summer evening, and I was letting it waft over me to calm my spirit before I had to enter my den of chaos.

As I walked, I heard a saxophone playing very mellow jazz. The further I went, the clearer and more beautiful it became. It first I thought it was one of the street musicians who occasionally sets up to earn a little change from passers-by. But this was too good. It just melted all the tension out of me and drew me like the Pied Piper to its source. It was a guy leaning against a storefront that used to be the Payless Shoe store, but the sign had changed to, "The Succeed in Life Center," and below it were the lighted words: "Stop Suffering!"

Stop Suffering? Yeah, that's what I needed. But how? I stood there and realized that the music was washing away my suffering, at least for the moment. I leaned against a lamp pole and took it all in—the pleasant air, the pink sky from the setting sun that cast a rosy glow over everything, and that music from … from an angel, maybe. This must be what heaven is like!

While I listened, my eyes kept drifting up to the sign that said, "Stop Suffering!" And I wanted to, oh how I wanted to stop suffering. Then through the windows of the storefront, I noticed a couple of men at the far end of the room. One was carrying a large, rugged-looking cross over his shoulder, kind of the way you see Jesus pictured in paintings carrying His cross. They set it up at the front and stood back to check whether it was straight. Wow! This was some kind of a church and there were rows of chairs set up facing the front.

I would have stayed right there all night if that sax player had kept on playing, but when he finished, I complimented him and went on my way. My moment of heaven had passed. But that night, when I thought everyone else was asleep, I buried my face in my pillow and prayed and cried and cried and prayed, "God, God, please help me. Help me find that kind of peace. Help me find a church that will lead me to You and won't lead me astray. I want to go somewhere where I can find the kind of peace I felt this evening. Please, God! I'll do anything, just help me."

It was not a new prayer. I'd actually been praying that kind of a prayer for a long time, but that evening I had tasted—if

only for a few moments—what real peace could be, and I desperately wanted to make it permanent.

The next day I told Derrick we needed to start going to church. It wasn't enough just to read the Bible on our own. We needed to connect with God in a more personal way. So the next Sunday we got ourselves all cleaned up and went to church. We chose a really big church, one of the most popular churches in Atlanta. In some ways, it was nice, a rocking choir and music really got you going. But it was all too theatrical for me with lots of fog and special effects when the pastor came out, and somehow, even though it was a great event, I didn't feel like I had connected with God, not like in that little church on the hill where I'd gone forward and prayed or even on the street listening to that saxophone player. I needed something simple and straightforward.

* * * *

Our chances in the music industry hadn't died with the tragic car accident that took out Lisa Lopes. Some time later we received a FedEx envelope from Sony Music Entertainment in New York. Tabari Sturdivant, the A&R for Jive Records (a division of Sony), had heard some of our demos, liked them, and wanted to come down to Atlanta to meet with us. We thought, this is it! We're in for sure, now.

The man came, and we had our meeting. He listened to more of our stuff and liked what he heard. "I'll get back to you guys as soon as we have our next acquisitions meeting in New York. You'll be hearing from me."

Boy, we were ready to quit our day jobs and buy ourselves each a flashy new ride. But contracts in the music industry take much longer than either Derrick or I imagined and are seldom what you hoped they would be. It's a very cut-throat industry. So we were fortunate that we didn't count our "success" too soon and begin spending what we did not have.

When we hadn't heard anything from Tabari in a couple of weeks, we figured we better cover our bets, and so we met with every other music producer who would listen to us. We even did a song for an album Mark Morrison released into stores on his Mack Life Records label. But Morrison had recently served time in jail for smuggling a gun onto an aircraft travelling from Newcastle to Belfast, and he was not as well known in the States as he was in Europe, so sales didn't do much, though we did get paid a little money.

* * * *

In the meantime, I kept thinking about that magical evening on the street listening to that saxophone player. Was there some way to recreate that moment? Some way to extend its peace into my whole life? Some way to truly "Stop Suffering"?

Then one morning when I was home alone in the apartment—my telemarketing shift didn't begin until noon, and everyone else was out—a voice from the TV, which seemed to always be on, caught my attention. It was a commercial about a church that was going to have some special meetings with strong prayers for deliverance and miracles. I glanced up and realized the speaker was

standing outside the same storefront church I'd stopped by the week before. I could see the sign in the background, "Stop Suffering." The special meetings were beginning that evening and would continue every night of the week. Everyone was invited.

Special meetings, strong prayers, deliverance, miracles—yeah, that's what I needed. I called my boss and asked if I could come in early so I could get off early. Remarkably, someone else was out sick, and she agreed.

* * * *

On my way back from work that night I smoked a blunt. Even though I knew it might make my eyes look bloodshot and people could probably smell it, I still had this idea that weed helped me concentrate. But, I said to myself, if anyone in that Succeed in Life Center criticizes me, I'm not coming back.

When I walked in the door, there weren't that many people there—perhaps twenty or thirty—but they smiled at me and the usher greeted me like he was really glad I was there. No one said anything about how ghetto I looked or that I reeked of weed.

There weren't any flashy celebrities or special music. Everyone just sang some simple songs together, and then the pastor preached about surrendering your life totally to the Lord. Afterwards, someone introduced me to the pastor, and he sat down and talked with me. Again, I knew he could smell me, but that didn't seem to bother him. He shook my

hand, asked me how I was doing, and asked me if I wanted to talk about anything.

I shrugged, “If you want to hear it, yeah.” “Oh I do, I really do. Go ahead.”

So I just dumped it all out. I spoke for about an hour, telling him how I was feeling. And I could tell he really cared. He asked me a little more about whether I’d been sincere that night in the church on the hill when I prayed to give my life to Christ.

“Yeah, as far as I know, but it didn’t do much good.” “Hmm. You know the Bible says, ‘If we confess our sins,

he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.’ So maybe we should leave it to God whether it did any good. Sometimes it’s a process, which leads me to ask: Where are you now? Are you still willing to surrender your whole life to Him?”

“Well, yeah …” I thought of my midnight pleas. “Yeah, that’s what I’ve been prayin’. I’ll do anything if God will help me.”

“Well, that’s the right attitude, but there’s nothing you can actually do to earn God’s favor—no good deeds you can perform, no money you can pay to buy salvation. That’s because Jesus has already done it all, paid it all. However, as humans we can’t be in two places at once. We can’t give our life to Christ while at the same time trying to be the master of our own fate. Know what I’m mean?”

I nodded. What he said made sense, but I had no idea where that would lead me. Then I recalled reading in the Bible where Jesus said, ‘Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved,’ so I thought that might be next. And during the service, the pastor had said they were going to have a baptism that Sunday. “Do you think I could be baptized this Sunday?”

The pastor chuckled. “Well, you do sound serious, and there’s nothing to prevent you from being baptized if you want to. But I’ll tell you what. It sounds to me like your past has had a lot of religious confusion in it—from your dad and your mom and even other churches you’ve visited—so it might be good if you took a little time to be sure you want us to baptize you. Why don’t you keep coming for a while to be really sure we are of God? Then we’ll schedule you for baptism. We have them nearly every month.”

It made sense, so I started coming every night. I brought Janice and Derrick and Cheyan, and I started being convicted about some of the ways I was living. I was so thankful to God for reaching out to me that I wanted to please Him in every way. And I began to see that there were so many things in the Bible about how to live life better, ways that would help me Succeed in Life, which was why the church used that name. One of the first things was not sleeping with Janice any more. She didn’t really understand it, but I accepted that if God set up marriage as the commitment before sex, then He knew what He was talking about, and if we wanted a good marriage, we should follow that. It wasn’t a guilt thing. It was a way to move forward in fol- lowing God.

I was able to adjust my work schedule to allow me to drop by the church most nights, and every time I came, the people welcomed me with smiles, and the pastor was always available to listen when I needed prayer or needed to talk about stuff. And it seemed I had a lot of stuff to talk about. A lot of it was the deep-seated anger I carried about all the things that had happened to me. I still smoked weed and cigarettes regularly, but little by little I began to feel uncomfortable about that. I knew the cigarettes were bad for me. In fact, I was such a heavy smoker—three packs a day—that my lungs were ripe for cancer. If I wanted to have a better life, I couldn't keep abusing my body. But breaking my addiction to cigarettes was harder than what I could do on my own. So I began praying that God would help me break it.

"What about the marijuana?" the pastor asked. "Why don't you pray that God sets you free from everything?"

Whoa! I hadn't thought about that. I didn't think I was addicted to weed. I just liked it a lot. But I went home that night and thought about it. Whether or not it had the same grip on me as nicotine, weed was a drug, a drug that was not only illegal but had been associated with everything bad that had happened to me since I had started using it as a little kid. And I had to admit that while I had used it as a crutch for coping with life, it had never really helped me concentrate or given me special insights or helped me write music. Whenever I'd accomplished anything good in those areas, I'd done it in spite of the drugs, not because of them. But it was hard to think about giving it up. How would I face

the continuing chaos in my home without something to dull the hurt?

Could I trust Jesus to help me? I thought of the passage the pastor had recently preached on. I got out my Bible and found Jesus' words again in the Gospel of Matthew: "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." Could I trust Him to do for me what weed had never accomplished and barely had dulled?

That night and every day after that, I cried out to God asking Him to set me free from everything.

I got baptized after I'd been at the church a month. The church accepted me just as I was, and more importantly, so did the Lord, even with lots of rough edges in my life. It was a good lesson to me. While God wants to help us and change us, we don't have to clean ourselves up before being accepted by Him.

But I was so grateful to God for saving me—and I'm not talking just about the hereafter—that I wanted to change, I wanted to grow into everything He wanted me to be. So I prayed, "I don't care what it takes, God, whatever it takes, I just want to be free." The next morning when I woke up and lit a cigarette, the first drag caused my chest to tighten up so bad I couldn't get my breath. After a few moments when it had eased, I tried another drag just to see if it was the cigarette that was causing it or if I was coming down with a cold or something.

Again, that heavy pressure settled in my chest. It wasn't that painful, but it was very uncomfortable … and scary. Something was wrong. And then I remembered my prayer: "Whatever it takes!" Could this be God's answer to me, His way of helping me feel what smoke was doing to my body? I put out the cigarette and went about my day, amazingly free of the craving for nicotine. But that night I decided to test it one more time. So I lit up, and again that tightness felt like it was crushing me.

That was it! I quit the cigarettes, the marijuana, and the alcohol. And I accepted this as being God's way of helping me get free. After that I began to feel stronger and stronger. I began to enjoy working out in the gym, thankful that I lived in a building with a gym. I was also surprised at how much pocket money I had when I wasn't spending it all on my habits. I got a new shirt and then some shoes. It was nice. However, though I may have been more physically addicted to the cigarettes, weed was what I missed most. For nearly a month it was a strong temptation, but I knew I needed to find my help in the Lord without using drugs and alcohol to mask what I was going through.

And I was still going through stuff. My living situation was still a mess. My mom was still crashing in our apartment. Janice still made my heart ache. Our music career still hadn't taken off, and I didn't yet know what I was going to do with my life.

It’s been a long time comin’, and I can’t lie.
I seen a lot of brothas fall like it’s bedtime.
They found bodies by the pond
on the shoreline.
I’m from a city where they killaz
in the daytime
And all the Niggaz turn gorillaz
when it’s wartime.
They try to drill us, but we stimulate
our own mind
And send our questions up to God ’cause
we His kind.
And He gonna send all answers back to
me in due time.
But all that Shank is really askin’ for is
lime light.
Pray we can help anotha brotha get his life
right.

CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

THE LEASE for our apartment on Peachtree ran out, and Derrick and I agreed that it would be better for us to get separate apartments. He and Cheyan were coming to the church, as was Janice, but there were just too many causes of tension trying to live together under the same roof. And then, of course, there was still Mom.

When we left the Peachtree apartment, Mom went back to Tallahassee, Florida, to the old family house where Aunt Nette still lived. Derrick found a place for his family, but I couldn't quickly find a place for Janice and me. She decided to visit her mother in Seattle, while I stayed with my sister May and continued looking.

I didn't much like the idea of Janice going to Seattle, given the suspicions my Mom had planted, but it was Janice's choice, and we were trying to give each other more space. So we agreed that when I found a place, she'd come back.

After a couple of months, I found an apartment, and called Janice. She returned and got a job, too, so that helped out, though it was a very low paying job in a clothing store. I was still committed to us not sleeping together until after we were married, so I slept in the living room on the floor while she had the bedroom. We both spent much of our free time at the church, focusing on God and trying to get our lives together.

This went on for about five months until one day the pastor asked us to sit down together with him. “Since the two of you are in a relationship, I think it is important you are open with each other. Janice told me something this morning that I think she needs to share with you.”

What was this about? I turned and nodded to her, probably with a frown on my face. It took her several minutes of stammering around before she finally explained that she’d gotten to know the driver on the bus she took to work every day and they’d gone on some dates together.

At first I couldn’t believe it, but she’d just told me herself, and so what could I say? I didn’t yell or go off on her—the pastor was sitting right there—but I was deeply disappointed, and I knew that, given our history, this was the end.

We went home and were cordial to one another, but I knew it was over even though I couldn’t bring myself to say it until a couple of weeks later when she confessed that she’d actually slept with the guy.

I shook my head and with tears in my eyes, said, “You know, Janice, when we were in the world, this kind of a thing might have been expected, but now we’re in the church, and I can’t build a life with someone like this. This is enough. I’m leaving. You can have the apartment. The rent’s paid up for the month, but I gotta go.”

I moved out the next day.

It hurt. And for a while after that, when Janice showed up at church, I'd tell myself, if she really changed, I'd give her another chance. But her behavior and interest in the Lord seemed to decline until I didn't see much of her anymore. As painful as it was, God used it as one more step in freeing me from my old destructive lifestyle. Like the pastor had preached one evening from the Book of Job: "Though your beginning was small, yet your latter end would increase abundantly." But that could only happen when I allowed Jesus to "make all things new," as He promised He would do in the Book of Revelation.

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Derrick and Cheyan were fully involved in the church, and I kept in close contact with Derrick, learning more about God and working on our music. I actually spent most of my free time at church, helping in any way I could. Sometimes it was just vacuuming the floor, emptying the garbage, cleaning the windows, and arranging the chairs for the next meeting. Sometimes I helped divide all the donated food we received so we could serve the homeless people bags of various items. Sometimes I helped in the office, sending out mailings, or I'd pass out fliers to people who walked by out front.

I would do whatever was needed until it got to the point that I was doing everything but the actual pastoral duties. It was a joy. In the afternoon, I'd go work my paying job, but I was always eager to come back to the church, so much was changing inside me. Serving the Lord and helping people was where I found my peace, and that's what I enjoyed.

At the same time, the prayer and the teaching from the Word was helping me let go of my anger so that I was able to forgive my dad and mom and other family members I thought hadn't done right by me. I needed to talk, and the pastor was willing to sit down with me for hours so that I lost my desire to fight and hurt people. Everything … I was letting go. I gave up the mindset that the world owed me something because I was born into such a bad family. I was even able to emotionally release Janice and trust God that His plan for my life was better than what I had wanted.

* * * *

Other than working at the church and my "day job," music was the only other thing I spent time on. Though Derrick and I remained in contact with Tabari Sturdivant from Jive Records, he never came through with any kind of a firm contract or deal. But there was another guy from Sony who'd been responsible for managing Lisa Lopes's recording company. After she died, he wanted to salvage whatever she'd been working on, and that's how he came across our stuff. He liked it and we arrived at a deal: Once we recorded the first six songs, we'd get together and select which one would be released as a single before the album came out, then we'd go on and finish the album. It was a solid deal, even though we hadn't worked out all the contractual matters.

So Derrick and I kept working on refining and finally recording those six songs, and we'd nearly finished when the pastor asked me to a meeting. When I arrived, I was

surprised to see that some of the international leaders from out of town were there, too.

“Brother,” the pastor began, “we’re excited about the seriousness you’ve demonstrated about serving the Lord and ministering to the people. And we’ve seen how you’ve grown. We need more young men like you in the ministry, and so we’re wondering if you’d be interested in being trained for fulltime ministry. You don’t have to answer right now. Take your time and pray about it, because it is a major commitment. We have needs all over the world, and it’s very likely that you’d be sent to other cities to serve. Your time won’t be your own. But then, you’ve been living that way for many months already … ready to come when called and go where sent.”

I went home from that meeting realizing I was facing a major fork in the road of my life. I was twenty-one years old, and my music career looked as if it was just about ready to take off. I’d already changed the nature of the songs I was writing. I’d told the guy from Sony that I wouldn’t be doing anymore negative music, and he was cool with that. I believed that Derrick and I could have a positive influence on young people through our music, so it wasn’t an obvious choice between serving the devil or serving the Lord. I thought both could be good.

But the question was: What was God calling me to do? I recalled the pastor’s challenge to me when we first talked: “We can’t give our life to Christ while at the same time trying to be the master of our own fate.” After years of painful choices, I had found what a wreck I could make of

my life trying to be the master of my own fate, and that's why I had given my life totally to Christ. I was still there—I wanted only to do what God called me to do. But what was that?

As I prayed, the Lord helped me see that the music industry was not a ministry. Every company was in the business for one reason: to make money. Some were more cutthroat about it than others, but the bottom line was, if you didn't make money, you were done. Given the popularity of the kind of music we produced and the promotional muscle at Sony's disposal, it was likely that we could end up making some big money. And in that context, it might be possible to do good things for God, God might call some people to serve in that capacity for as long as they can, and some have definitely done so. But was that a situation where I would thrive? Or would I slowly be corrupted by small decisions to accommodate the demands of the industry rather than seeking God's will? And the bigger the money, the harder it might be to stick to my convictions even if it meant walking away. Could I do that?

I didn't have a very good track record for walking away from "money." There was big money in drugs, and I hadn't been able to say no to it until I was destroying myself and faced losing my freedom and nearly my life.

I argued with myself. Giving up a potential career in music would be the biggest sacrifice in my life. I loved music!

God had given me a talent for it. Why wouldn't He want me to use it? Couldn't He give me the strength and wisdom to navigate the minefields of the music industry?

Of course He could … if He'd called me into it!

But then why had He at the very same time given me an invitation to enter the ministry full time? What was I to make of that? That invitation had come through godly people, people I trusted, people who had certainly prayed long and hard before ever speaking to me about it. Could I even imagine that the music offer was the result of anyone's prayers? Not likely.

God had saved my life so many times when I shoulda been dead, certainly it had been for something He planned for me. And even though I loved music, I had grown to love ministry, too. I enjoyed helping people. I enjoyed telling about God's mercy and grace. And I enjoyed working with youth.

In the end, my prayers brought me to clarity. I said yes to being trained for fulltime ministry. With Derrick's blessing, I contacted my manager, thanked him, but said we were letting the offer pass.

Some people thought I was crazy to choose a simple life of ministry over the potential of fame and fortune and power that seemed within our grasp through the music industry, and though it was the hardest decision I had ever made in my life, I was immediately at peace. I'd chosen the better path, and I would leave the rest to God.

EPILOGUE

AFTER BEING trained as a pastor and serving in several cities, including London, Damien Jackson is now working full time as a youth minister in the Succeed in Life Center in New York where he is the leader of the Youth Power Group. He dedicates his time to helping troubled youth, who like himself, should have been dead. He is now married to a wonderful young woman he met through the church, and together they enjoy traveling, hiking, and just spending time together.

His brother Derrick (not his real name) also remains on the path with Christ and is now married with three beauti- ful boys. Derrick has his own small business with which he supports his family legally.

While several of the guys they knew on the block are now either in prison or dead, both Damien and Derrick live in gratitude to God for saving their lives … when they "Shoulda Been Dead!"

BIO FOR DAVE JACKSON

Dave Jackson and his wife, Neta, are the award-winning authors or coauthors of over 130 books, including the 40-volume Trailblazer series about great Christian heroes, the Hero Tales series, the Yada Yada Prayer Group and House of Hope novels as well as many other books. They make their home in the Chicago area. Read more about them and their writing by visiting www.daveneta.com.

7 STEPS TO BEAT THE STREET

IF YOU'VE finished reading my book, then you know that I've been there, done that, and got the scars to prove it. It's easy to get into the streets. You don't plan for it, you don't ask for it. One day you just realize you're in it.

Now getting out is a whole 'nother ball game. You want to, but you don't know how to.

If you're thug—you bang, slang, hustle or even if you're using, it doesn't matter; maybe you're a beginner or a veteran on the streets and want out. I want to show you how.

I asked myself:

What did I do that finally got me off the streets?

As I thought about it, I came up with 7 steps, 7 things I did, that changed my life.

I also realized that these 7 steps have been used successfully by other people like me and they turned their lives around too.

Now I want to share these 7 steps with you.

I will email you free of charge, nothing to pay, the 7 Steps to Beat the Streets, when you register on this website:

www.shouldabeendead.com

Just go to the website and within minutes you will have the 7 Steps in your hands.

Do it now before you forget.

Damien Jackson

Feel free to email me: damien@shouldabeendead.com