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The Talk

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THE TALK

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Master's Program in Creative Writing

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THE TALK

by

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THESIS

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Preface

There are millions of loving mothers, across racially marked divides, of Black sons who are painfully aware of what it means to give birth to and raise Black sons in a world that marks their sons from birth as “unwanted,” as “problems” who are already so-called criminals, uneducable thugs, and surplus bodies.

— George Yancy

Reflections of the Past

I chose “the talk” as the topic and title for my prose manuscript because it provides the most accurate representation of the harsh realities faced in my own childhood. The subject also bear witness to subtler versions of those preventive discussions passed down through generations. Such reflections led me to the point of connecting the dots of systemic racism and the protective measures taken by our relatives, even back then. Perhaps Ta-Nehisi Coates opined it best when he wrote:

Now at night, I held you in a great fear, wide as all our American generations, took me. Now I personally understood my father and the old mantra— ‘Either I can beat him or the police [can brutalize him].’ I understood it all – the cable wires, the extension cords, the ritual switch. Black people love their children with a kind of obsession. You are all we have, and you come to us endangered. I think we would like to kill you ourselves before seeing you killed by the streets that America made (Coates, 82).

To this end, I credit more than just my late mother for taking on the role of raising me. There was my stern, evangelical grandmother, who helped to guide my path. In keeping with the “village mentality,” many in our community also had a hand in my upbringing. For the most part, my siblings and I were sheltered, kept at a distance from the “disorderly bunch.” My mother would often swear she could see straight through those “unruly rascals” who seemingly were always up to no good. It seemed her mission in life was keeping us way at a distance from them. Thus, any mischiefs in which we dared to engage were short lived.

For her own part, if my grandmother could have kept us forever confined in that modest little house, immersed in scriptures and spiritual hymns, she would have done so. She already had a plan in place to ensure that none of her grandchildren would ever find trouble and likewise, trouble, would never find them. The plan involved: church all day on Sunday, revival meetings four times a week, and preparation for Sunday school, at least four hours on Saturdays. In her mind, this rigorous schedule left little time for idol mischief and would presumably keep us out of the ensnaring grasp of law enforcement.

While back then, I was ill-informed about their rationales, their homegrown tutorials about the oppressive ways of the white-world, nor able to assimilate their versions of lynching with today's lethal use of force against Black people, I am now better able to see that the reason our parents and grandparents parented so hard was to prevent a foregone conclusion. I now understand that their harsh parenting was a proactive effort to protect us from a cruel future fate.

But for all their good intentions, such awareness came with new revelations that cannot go unnoticed. For all this obedience, they, and we, were no better off. Not much has improved over the years except more clever ways of shielding the obvious. Black men die whether they submit or resist, whether they are hoodlums or pillars of the community, whether they adhere to the talk, or turn a deaf ear. In no small measure, those informative years played a vital role in writing my prose manuscript, *The Talk*. Reflections of the past, its correlation to modern day, and the profiles befitting those who would oppress and continue to dominate proved an invaluable resource and basis for my story.

Story Synopsis

The Talk, is the story about a determined mother, Detective Anjanae Bridges, who like most mothers, must go to great lengths to protect her son, Broderick Bridges, from a bad police

encounter. It is Independence Day, 2014 and Broderick is with friends in Virginia and Otis Cobb Memorial Park. Three other young men have robbed a liquor store in another part of the city, several miles away. It is an obvious case of mistaken identity. But that matters none to Paterson PD's fiercest law man, Max Judah Kane. Kane's daughter, Jada, was brutally murdered in 2012. The perpetrator who caused her death was a notorious drug dealer, Cevonté Anthony, of African American descent. Never relinquishing the fact that someone must pay brutally with a life of their own, the 22-year veteran vowed the shade of revenge must reflect the color of his daughter's killer.

Having had the tumultuous talk earlier that day, Anjanae later finds herself having to swoop in to protect her innocent son from the long arm of the law. Seven cops and six police cars have him cornered at her doorstep, with guns drawn. Earlier, Broderick, who had been cleared of any outstanding warrants, took off running. Paterson PD's fiercest law man, Max Judah Kane, had come to collect. Make good on the retribution he had promised himself years ago. In effort to deescalate the situation, Anjanae makes a fatal attempt to reveal her badge. In the process, she is gunned down, and Broderick severely maimed.

The Talk, purposely has a few twists and turns, contradictions, and a fair share of exhilarating themes. Namely, Anjanae herself is a detective. Additionally, while mostly we see young Black men falling prey to police force, unexpectedly, this time it is the mother who is the victim – a sign to a Black community that not even Black mothers are safe.

Another contradiction is the fact that Independence Day is being celebrated by three young Black men, who are skeptical of a nation that has excluded Black people from society's largesse. Other themes reflected are healing, forgiveness and devotion, amends and understanding, sorrow and repentance, social injustice, exhaustive police brutality, and seemingly a world that is on a bad trajectory course.

Writing Process & Framework

I have never been a fan of placing limits on creativity. When I write, I try to be honest and open with myself, no matter what is going through my head. I embrace the ugliness of the present and the past, and don't shy away from challenging topics. But at the same time, I strive to find that silver lining even in the darkest moments. I aspire to give hope to people who feel oppressed, and to encourage even more people to stand up for truth and justice.

I write because it's a form of catharsis for me, and I believe in the power of words to connect us and create understanding. There are also times, I tune out the outside world and just let the words lead me. It's a magnificent journey, and if I can do my part to make the world a better place in the process, then all the better.

But notwithstanding such aspirations, factored into my writing process was the prevailing question, "Who am I writing to?" With this inquiry in mind, I had to reconcile that not every reader would or even could relate. Not all believe systemic racism is a pervasive problem. Some even carelessly suppose that more Black men are dying simply because they commit more crimes. While others yet believe there is only one America, and it embraces the mantra of equal liberty and justice for all. This insight notwithstanding, my goal as a writer is to remain openminded so that my own biases does not cloud my judgment or disallow my imagining what that conversation would sound like in its purest form—stripped away from any of the fear-mongering or political rhetoric.

Throughout my journey through UTEP's Creative Writing program, I have had the fortune of reading a variety of fiction, from hard-hitting classics like Ta-Nehisi Coates' *Between the world and me*; contemporary models like Percival Everett's *Erasure*, Carl Upchurch's, *Convicted in the Womb*, and Mumia Abu-Jamal's, *Have Black Lives Ever Mattered?* Along with these, Gregory Pardlo's *Air Traffic*, and Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric*, ably informed the writing of my prose manuscript. I quickly concluded that *The Talk* was a composite of Coates, et al.'s

descriptions of Black people's struggles with otherness, and their quest to find solidarity in a white-dominated society.

What seems repetitive throughout Coate's et al.'s, body of work and is so reflected in my prose manuscript, is this intense need for preservation of the body. It proliferates itself in a prevailing theme. "So I fear not just the violence of this world but the rules design to protect you from it, the rules they would have you contort your body to address the block, and contort it again to be taken seriously...and contort it again so as not to give the police a reason" (Coates, 90).

Schenwar, et al., induces a slightly different spin, coupling preservation of the body with breathing: "My child's breath is a freedom song. In. Out. In. Out. In. Out. The rhythmic pulse of air he powers is love, is life, is liberation. In. Out. In. Out. My child is breath. Each breath is a life force and each life force is a gift, is Holy. He is Divine" (Schenwar, et al., 16).

From Coates' words to Schenwar and others' expressions, it feels like a call to action. The breath itself can be viewed as a form of liberation; preservation of the body, an act of defiance against the forces that would try to subdue it. Coupled together, they serve as a reminder that collectively, both are inextricably linked to freedom.

Simultaneously, such illustrations are propagated with the message of the harsh reality facing many Black men: too often they exist in a dream state, telling themselves this deadly thing can't be happening, in so many variations, so frequently. Nor can this fear of upstanding older Black men persist, causing them to repeatedly look over their shoulders for that unscrupulous cop or those self-appointed civilian vigilantes.

In a manner similar to the sources above, I also wanted to show how a nation habitually analyzes each killing, labeling the decedent as "unarmed," "innocent," and "black." This implies that the typical criminal is usually "armed," "guilty," and likely "black." Its pervasiveness is just as Percival Everett stated, almost to the point of mocking, "I have dark brown skin, curly hair, a broad

nose, some of my ancestors were slaves and I have been detained by pasty white policemen in New Hampshire, Arizona and Georgia and so the society in which I live tells me I am black; that is my race” (Everett, 1).

There’s almost a cueing that the same specificity is not given to tagging the badged shooter as “white,” “aggressive,” “corrupt,” or himself likely to commit crimes. Equally noticeable, is the implication that countless number of Black men who have been killed unjustly by corrupt cops, and the real prejudice from one Black community to the next, did not exist.

Owing to this fact, *The Talk* reflects Gregory Pardlo’s powerful exploration of the consequences of living in a society where inequality is pervasive. So pervasive, that a stern faith is relied upon in order to cope. Be it an unwavering faith, a strong conviction in the everlasting, or simply a way for Black people to make sense of the pervasive inequities, and mothers to grin and bear the repetition of their son's death, Black people have long held fast to the belief in a higher power. Gregory Pardlo's *Air Traffic* captures this sentiment by noting “[T]he story of the black American, because it has an identifiable originating event...is difficult to spin as inspiring or promising...the suffering endured by the meek is given a purpose: the meek must nobly endure, anticipating their inheritance” (Pardlo, 165, 166) in the afterlife.

Striving to adopt a similar style of such prolific writers, I found that reducing my thoughts to paper was how I could best give a voice to all the human suffering forced upon Black and Brown communities. Also, because I had discovered some veracities about my fitness – or lack thereof – for protest rallies and marches. When it all died down, when everyone went back to neutral corners, there was that deafening silence.

Nothing more was heard until the next unjustified deadly use of force incident. Those with bullhorns, and others raising, "no justice, no peace" signs suddenly seemed at a lost for keeping the movement alive when the crisis had settled. In other words, the response seemed more reactionary

than proactive. I noticed too, that there seldom was a plan for long-term reform. Plainly speaking, while I did sense that many desired to join hand in solidarity, address social issues head on, not many seem to know how to formulate an agenda, state what changes were desired, and few had effective strategies for bringing these issues into the public consciousness.

Admittedly, I was a part of the above-mentioned groups and no less guilty of complacency. Often at a loss for what next to do, how to keep the movement alive. I concluded that if I couldn't be a part of the solution, I certainly did not want to be a part of the problem. I wanted to stay in my lane; grow where I was planted. With energy waning, especially as I got older, and less likely to be as active a participant in marches and protests for social justice, I found that I was not without that one vital resource - writing.

Above all else, I now view my greatest weapon is using my writing to its full potential. This means utilizing my skills and creativity to educate others on issues related to social justice through various means: persuasive articles, thought-provoking essays, editorials, powerful opinion pieces, hard hitting stories, and much more.

As vital as the decision to choose such a weighty topic, was finding the most appropriate means of conveying the message. I endeavored to use vivid descriptions and powerful dialogues to make the scenes feel real and immediate—to put readers in the shoes of both mother and son, and even law enforcement during this critical exchange. The goal was to ensure *The Talk* encompassed all the standard components of a story: characters, plotline, setting, theme, and point of view. In addition, a variety of literary techniques were utilized to enhance *The Talk* and give the story greater depth. These included flashbacks, imagery, dreams, foreshadowing, similes, metaphors, alliteration, personification, and symbolism.

Hot weather was used to symbolize the racial tension in Paterson, New Jersey. With phrases like “fortifying death’s icy touch within its walls” and the introduction of a dead baby raven in the

first chapter, foreshadowing was used to hint at Kane's daughter's demise. Additionally, I used pairing of words such as ‘raging rain’ and ‘deadly desecrations’ to create an alliterating effect. Imagery was employed to produce an even more vivid atmosphere; for example, sensory phrases like “nasal passages succumbing to a thick acrid smell of singed flesh” and “blistering effects that clung to the skin like hot steam.” In addition, a myriad of metaphors, similes, and analogies were used throughout *The Talk* to create vivid and engaging visualizations.

My intention is that *The Talk* and stories like it, would dismantle the barriers between different ethnicities, cultures, and backgrounds. Correspondingly, I aspire that *The Talk* would foster better consciousness among those who may never have experienced the Black struggle. We saw a collective response from around the world when George Floyd was killed in 2020--the unified outcry concerning his death demonstrated that we are indeed all connected by something much greater than who we are. If effective enough, *The Talk* would have achieved another objective, a confirmation that storytelling has the power to broaden our perspectives and help bridge divides. Simultaneously, its value would have been established if we are better able to recognize how we are all bound together by humanity's ties, a connection that is not diminished by something as outward and trivial as skin color.

Characterizing the Talk

Resentfully, Black mothers feel that solemn obligation to discuss difficult topics with their sons about how racism and police brutality has been prevalent in Black communities for centuries long. It's an ever-evolving lesson, passed down through generations, designed to instruct young Black men about how to conduct themselves in a police encounter, and stay alive. This is known as the talk. In her *Essence* article, “What Do We Tell Our Sons About Interacting With Police?” Melba Pierce asserts that, “The goal here is to prevent an unnecessary escalation of a police encounter. If

we tell our children (and follow) some simple rules, hopefully senseless deaths will be reduced, while shining a spotlight on bad officers who behave in a wrongful manner” (Pearson, 4).

This crucial piece of advice notwithstanding, unsettlingly, within the backdrop of every conversation is that agonizing image of a mother’s young Black son, standing unarmed before an officer, staring in fear and desperation, begging for his life, and sees utter hatred staring back at him. Only to hear the commanding words: ‘Put your F-ing hands up where I can see them. Do it now or I’ll blow you away!’

Every second of hesitation brings the possibility of a terrible outcome closer to reality. The fear that weighs heavily in mother’s hearts is enough to tighten their throats in the utterance of each word. The skepticisms and uncertainties that the talk would save their son’s life is no less daunting. Says CNN’s John Blake:

You say, “Don’t resist police. That advice didn’t appear to help...[a] black man in Minneapolis who died...while a white police officer put his feet on his neck while arresting him. Avoid confrontations with white men. That didn’t save the 25-year-old unarmed Black man who was fatally shot while taking a jog in rural Georgia...followed by two armed white men in a truck who later said he looked like a suspect in a string of local burglaries. Be respectful when you talk to white folks. That didn’t seem to help...the Ivy League-educated black man...bird-watching in New York’s Central Park...when a white woman threatened to call the police on him after he confronted her about not leashing her dog (Blake).

I suspect too, that for Black mothers, the elation of their son’s existence is accompanied by a heartbreaking understanding that no amount of intelligence, kindness, or good looks can change how others may view them. Malone Gonzales best illustrates this veracity by introducing the unique term called “double consciousness” wherein she expresses “I consider how double consciousness—seen here as mothers’ use of controlling images of criminality held by dominant society—influences

how mothers think about children's gendered racial vulnerability to police violence" (Gonzales, 365).

In simpler terms, a Black mother's tendency is to look at her son through the lens of how other people would perceive him. Whether she is aware of it or not, this observation is done as a precautionary measure. Gonzales further characterizes it as the "...mechanisms through which dominant culture perpetuates oppressive narratives based on race..." (365).

The talk between mother and son also encompasses a discussion of certain societal norms, such as dress code expectations of African Americans that can be deemed suspicious or criminal by law enforcement. Mothers are thus left with no choice but to lecture their sons on the importance of maintaining an "immaculate appearance." Anything less than impeccable dress would have them viewed as hoodlums rather than upstanding members of their community.

In a particular passage, Anjanae stops her son cold in his tracks and demands, "Let me see what you're wearing out this house today." Forcing him to turn around and face her, her words are measured and firm but carry the weight of survival: "You already know my pet peeves Broderick; no hoodies, sagging, piercings or tattoos; not so much as a pocketknife, toenail clipper, or a fingernail file. And for God sakes, don't make a lot of unnecessary movements either. They get antsy about that too."

With this in mind, *The Talk* aspires to draw attention to that nauseating line of reasoning, which deepen the suffering of young African American men—and the mothers left to mourn them. That is, the insistence that a seventeen year old deserved death simply because he was sagging, wearing a hoodie, looking thuggish, or carrying a cellphone that resembled a gun. Or, that the so-call eighteen year old "menace" deserve to be mowed down simply because his perceived larger than average frame, made him a threat.

I attempted to portray this salient point in the scene whereupon the reader gains insight into Detective Anjanae Bridges's fears. Specifically, that her son's lankiness made him a worthy target

for cops' rash equating of the average young Black man with big cats and apes, or humanoids with formidable strength and magical powers. Moreover, that such crazed notions meant young Black men could feel no pain, and thus it took more fire power to bring them down.

On top of it all, Broderick at some point raises a pivotal question, "Is this what white kids have to do?" The inference makes it clear that there is a prejudiced distinction between how Black kids are viewed and treated compared to those of a different skin color. Snappily, Anjanae responds, "I am not their mother, am I? And you, are not white." Though her retort had a tinge of sarcasm, Anjanae - like many mothers - is not unmindful that their son(s) eventually would come justifiably questioning why they must have this conversation when it is already established that innately, police have an innate dislike for them without being prompted by any actual threat.

Key elements from *The Talk* shed light on how rational, or otherwise, mothers are compelled to caution their sons that offending an unethical, delicate officer can lead to death, a bleak reality that no mother should have to contemplate. I envision a mother's admonishments as being synonymous to that passage in *Between the World and me*. Author Ta-Nehisi Coates writes, "You preserved your life because your life, your body, was as good as anyone's, because your blood was as precious as jewels...You do not give your precious body to the Billy clubs of Birmingham sheriffs nor to the insidious gravity of the streets" (Coates, 35).

In a manner befitting Coates' urgings, mothers are equally duty-bound to preserve their son's self-esteem despite their sons being faced with degrading images or theories. That is to say, bolster their sons awareness about truths that should have been obvious. The key objective here is to ensure their sons remain aware that the fear felt by corrupt cops was created by them, and their offensive language, preconceived notions, and demoralizing behaviors was not a reflection of his inherent worth as a human being.

Another powerful theme that emerges in *The Talk* is the prospect of a mother outliving her

own son, a tormented anguish of which I suspect many would agree, no mother should have to endure. Seeing it through the eyes of a targeted child, George Yancy prefaced it this way: “Imagine the reaction, the pain and sorrow, the rapid heart-beat, the struggle to breathe, the hopelessness that my loving mother would have felt upon finding out that her Black son had been killed” (Yancy, et al., 2).

The Self-Contrived Threat

It’s also worth mentioning that oftentimes, the so called weapon was a selfie stick, a cell phone, a wallet, a Wii Controller, a cane, a spray nozzle, or an iPod—a list seemingly as endless, as it is, phantastic, given their low risk of lethality and their inconceivability to cause legitimate fear, let alone death.

To further drive the point home, in April 2021, Isaiah Brown was shot to death when a Virginia deputy mistook his cordless house phone for a gun; in May 2022, Donovan Lewis was shot, his vape machine mistaken for a weapon. Worst more, on the night of September 6, 2018, an unarmed Botham Jean was sitting on his own couch, in his own apartment eating ice cream, when Amber Guyer shot him, later claiming she was exhausted and thought she was facing an intruder in her own apartment. Likewise, a defenseless Breanna Taylor was innocently asleep in her bed, yet, still the victim of a “no-knock warrant” served in error at her home address.

Undeniably speaking, no danger was imposed upon the cop by either of these decedents. The lethal use of force incident having occurred without cause, begs the question of, “What possible purpose would a preliminary talk have served?” Evidently, it had no impact in preventing the aforementioned deaths and many more like them where young Black men were unarmed, a victim of mistaken identity, doing the things of everyday citizens, even those where there were actually no encounters or need for law enforcement involvement.

I endeavored to portray some semblance of these warrantless deaths in *The Talk*'s depiction of the 2010 murder of a 16-year-old character, Kareem Marquis Tyson, whose selfie stick was allegedly mistaken for a weapon. I also aspired to illustrate the brazenness of a cop (Max Kane), who had hounded Tyson, minutes before and upon determining the kill was unjustified, showed little remorse and even had the temerity to attempt to cover his tracks by planting a weapon next to the victim's corpse. As well as force the issue later in the Virginia and Otis Cobb Park scene where three innocent, unarmed, young Black men were victims of mistaken identity, though guns were brazenly drawn and pointed at them.

Lack of Measurable Gain & Accountability

Such tragic events have painted such an abominably consistent picture of inhumanity, colored with such blatant dispassion of the surrounding world. There seems to have been no measurable reductions in the number of Black men who are harassed, shamed, stopped, frisked, roughed up, stopped without probable cause, and little to no decline in the number of young Black men who are dying. Instead, it seems each year, the death toll of young, Black men reaches a new high. And, in far too many instances, the murder had nothing to do with legitimate cop fear. Moreover, the so called crime is often petty or comprise the activities of daily living: *banking while black, birdwatching while black, or lodging while black.*

In *Citizen: An American Lyric*, New York Times Bestseller Claudia Rankine, in one of her poetry piece wrote, “The charge the officer decided on was exhibition of speed. I was told, after the fingerprinting, to stand naked. I stood naked. It was only then I was instructed to dress, to leave, to walk all those miles back home” (Rankine, 109). In the forgoing passage, Rankine drives home the poignant fact that we are always made to bare our soul. But more than that, dark skin color and a cop's badge is the only authorization required for harassment, humiliation, or much worst. In a

subsequent passage, Rankine writes, “And still you are not the guy and still you fit the description because there is only one guy who is always the guy fitting the description” (109).

Many of these supposed life-saving discussions often seems a band-aid without measurable gain or guaranty that they actually saved lives. In many instances, lethal use of force and the grave injustices leveled upon our nation’s young Black brothers seem to continue despite the explicit discussion.

In his 2021 article, “Police Are Killing Fewer People in Big Cities, But More In Suburban and Rural America,” Samuel Sinyangwe asserted that “Six years after nationwide protests against police violence captured the country’s attention, [additional killings]...have put the issue of police violence back into national focus. Many are left asking what, if anything, has really changed” (Sinyangwe, 1). Sinyangwe was referring to the deaths of Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, and I suspect too, the other 201 African Americans who died by lethal force in 2021. He did concede however, that “the numbers have dropped significantly in America’s largest cities, but [were] likely due to reforms to use-of-force policies implemented in the wake of high-profile deaths” (1) and without any reported correlation to the effectiveness of these conversations.

I likewise find myself constrained to ask, “Are young, Black men complying with their mother’s desperate urgings or are they growing intensely bitter at the normalizing of police brutality and defiance, their above-the-law mentalities, often exuded despite the proper decorum of well-behaved Black men? More explicitly, are they viewing the talk as a total no-win situation; the withering consequences of both decisions displayed in crystal clarity?”

Much of this anguish is on display in the tense dialogues between a more tolerant Detective Anjanae Bridges and her son Broderick who is more adverse to law enforcements unsavory tactics. Impatient with his mother’s naiveté, Broderick becomes consumed with anger and lashes out with, “And they say Niggahs supposed to be free.” Not unwise to the flagrant inequities, Broderick puts

forth his own indictment of a double standard America and its justice system by raising a poignant question, “All I wanna know, is this what White people’s kids have to do to stay alive? Kiss-up to prejudice-assed cops?”

Echoing these sentiments, Alexandra Natapoff, in his 2018 book, *Punishment Without Crime...* wrote, “As a way of protesting racial disparities, White people confessed to minor crimes that police let them get away with. Reviewing the confessions, CNN concluded, “If you're white, you may be able to shoplift, drive drunk, even shove a police officer- and not suffer the same consequences a black person might” (Natapoff, 136).

Natapoff further conveyed that, “A study of Dane County, Wisconsin showed that prosecutors charge African Americans more harshly than whites for the same low-level crimes. Whites charged with misdemeanors are 45 percent more likely than Black people to receive reduced charges or to have their sentences dismissed entirely” (136).

Recognizing the rising death toll of unarmed Black man and despite his mother’s “glass is half full” outlook, Broderick is no less dialed-in to the conflicting and controversial ideologies that seem to divide America concerning the integrity of cops—ninety nine percent good and only one percent bad. This skepticism is vociferously portrayed in his retort, “Good cops don’t shoot innocent, unarmed people or try to make them hate themselves for being who they are.”

Too often, the outcry of African American communities in response to law enforcement mistreatment of young Black men has been immediately drowned out by an insistence that most cops are honorable and trustworthy. This simplistic view has proven ineffective and has done nothing but lessen accountability and fostered distrust between police forces and Black communities. Moreover, it raises a paramount question: “Why a police force purportedly comprised of 99% decent officers can't manage to overpower the negative impact of the bad ones? In other words, how is it that 1% of bad cops are overshadowing the efforts of the 99% of good cops?”

In his 2004 *Journal of Police and Criminal Psychology* article, “Good Cop – Bad Cop: Problem Officers, Law Enforcement Culture, and Strategies for Success,” Laurence Miller wrote, “Citizens who grew up in America a generation ago recall being taught that “the policeman is your friend, the one person you could go to if you were lost or in trouble.” (Miller, 30). But Miller later imparts that “This perception began to change in the last 30 years as law enforcement officers increasingly found themselves on the wrong end of civil disturbances and investigations into violations of civil rights and police procedures” (30). Miller also points out that “... in the last decade, we have seen an increasing number of news stories involving “bad cops” involved in isolated or repeated acts of abuse and corruption at levels ranging from individual infractions to department-wide scandals” (30).

Without any conclusive evidence from law enforcement or research data from outside sources, I contend that it is difficult to determine whether there are more good cops or bad cops. In the absence of such studies, it would appear the only fair and honest assessment is to concede that there are both good and bad police officers on the force, and leave it at that. One might otherwise conclude that anything else is a deception purposefully aimed at subverting public scrutiny.

At the same time, there is this flawed expectation - just as disconcerting - that mothers should deceive their sons that unsavory, questionable law enforcement tactics can be swiftly and amicably dealt with after the fact. The notion that a wrongly accused Black teen (or his mother) can approach law enforcement authorities afterward, complain about the bad actions of cops, and immediately receive justice for any wrongs committed by officers seems nothing short of an illusion.

In his article “Sworn to Protect: Police Brutality – A Dilemma for America’s Police.” *Race, Gender & Class*,” Lyle Perry writes “When a crime is committed by a law enforcement officer, it is hard to report and even harder to press charges” (Perry, 159).

Additionally, a Human Rights Watch article: “Shielded from Justice: Police Brutality and Accountability in the United States,” asserts that “Police internal affairs units, the principal

departmental investigators of physical abuse allegations, operate as a rule with excessive secrecy. The public, to whom police departments should be accountable, thus cannot ascertain whether, in fact, the police are policing themselves” (Shielded).

“The excessive use of force by police officers...persists because of overwhelming barriers to accountability. Police or public officials greet each new report of brutality with denials or explain that the act was an aberration, while the administrative and criminal systems that should deter these abuses by holding officers accountable instead virtually guarantee them impunity” (Shielded).

Owing Nothing to the Deceased

In direct contradiction to Voltaire’s famous opining, “To the living we owe respect, but to the dead we owe only the truth” (Moffat, 261), it seems those in Black communities are often the observers of a fundamentally flawed nature of policing. Likewise, *The Talk* explores the angst spurred by America's willingness to continue making excuses or preferring to look the other way, even though these heinous acts against Black people are repetitive, with no end in sight.

No less flagrant, is law enforcement departments turning against the dead victim, blaming the decedent—his so-called threatening actions and his enormous size—for his own death. Such outlandish notions manifests itself in dressing the cop up and the decedent down, making the cop smaller than his actual height, younger, nobler, and the decedent older, rougher, more ominous, more criminally inclined. John Wilson, in the following passage of “Racial Bias in Judgments of Physical Size and Formidability: From Size to Threat” illustrates this deception:

On April 30th, 2014, an unarmed Black man named Dontre Hamilton was shot 14 times and killed by a White police officer in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. The officer later testified that Hamilton had a “muscular build” and “most definitely would have overpowered...me or pretty much any officer I can think of, to tell you the truth. He was just that big, that

muscular...This account is contradicted by the autopsy, in which the medical examiner reported that Hamilton was 5'7" and 169 pounds (Wilson, et al., 3).

The aforementioned tragedies are made even worse by an abject indifference towards their needless and heinously lost lives. Too often, young Black men's lifeless bodies are left to decompose in the streets, neglected and forgotten until a coroner finally arrives to take them away; leaving behind a haunting reminder of the degradation of a worthwhile human being who was once so full of life.

Healing of America

Amidst broadcasting the controversial mistreatment and deadly force deployed against young Black men, *The Talk*, aspires to focus on a world that is in much need of that healing touch, far more love, the extinguishing of hate, and a realization that to do otherwise inevitably would lead to the undoing of mankind as a whole. In her memoir, *See No Strangers*, Valerie Kaur writes, "I see no stranger...I see no enemy. There is a voice inside each of us called Haumai, the *I* that names itself as separate from *You*. It resides in the bowl that holds our individual consciousness..." (Kaur, 9).

Few would discount the current and past displays of solidarity between Black people and their White counterparts or deem them as meaningless. No doubt, White people have turned out in unprecedented numbers to unify in a Black cause. Waving "no justice, no peace" signs, joining forces in toppling confederate statutes and monuments, lunchroom sit ins, their unified screams of "black lives matter;" and passionate chants of, "I can't breathe."

Kaur especially brings such revelations to the forefront by concluding this particular passage by stating "The bowl breaks. For a moment, we taste the truth, sweet as nectar—we are part of one another...we can choose to remember the truth of our interconnectedness, that we belong to one another, we can choose to "see no stranger" (9).

At times, this need for truth and oneness is as palpable for White people as it has been for

their Black counterparts. One can readily sense, the need for forgiveness, a want for relief from guilt and remorse for American greatest sin and continued oppression, even if there yet exist that ever imposing force for continued denial.

I sought to portray aspects of this necessity for healing and unity earlier on in the opening lines with a daughter (Jada Kane) stating to her father 'No matter what happens Dad, no more bloodshed. Should I succumb to this assassin's bullets, spilling the blood of another innocent Black man, out of revenge, will not bring me back. Nor, will it ease your pain Dad.' In subsequent passages, a mother (Anjanae Bridges) likewise admonishes her son 'Do not harm a single hair on that man's head. It won't bring me back. Nor will it bring the peace you yearn.'

My goal was to depict healing also in the closing chapter, *Coming to Terms*. Max Judah Kane, exonerated from killing Anjanae Bridges, triggers a plan of vengeance to be exacted by Broderick and his compadres. Disrupting this plan of attack, Anjanae appears to her son in a vision, urging him against taking matters into his own hands but also imploring him to "Release him," not just physically from the zip ties that bound him, but also with forgiveness. Taking it a step further, she insisted upon Broderick's indulgence of Kane's own tragedies, inner turmoil, and emotional hell.

Later on, it comes full circle the two (Broderick and Kane) share something in common: that is to say, their tragic losses. Anjanae's death, for which both were in some way responsible (Kane's deadly bullet piercing her body and Broderick for bringing the trouble to his mother's doorstep; allowing her to serve as his bulletproof vest. Simultaneously, there was Kane's angst over the possibility that Jada was struck by one of his bullets during his face-off with the drug-dealing Cevonté Anthony, who had abducted Jada days before. Here, it was crucial to portray how the two opposing characters were inextricably bound.

Having arrived within an hour of his sidekick's returning, Broderick releases Kane, and directs him to an escape hatch, the pathway towards freedom. A month later, Broderick visits

Anjanae's grave and finds a condolence card where Kane has inscribed Jada's last plea. Along with it, an array of daffodils, blue irises, and ferns placed beside the wreath. Each flower had a symbolic tag: forgiveness and devotion, amends and understanding, sorrow and repentance. With a knowing smile, Broderick twirls the burnt-red yarn also left by Kane, around his fingers. It was Kane's memorabilia from the bloody knit shirt Jada wore the night of her murder and as Kane stated, "The ties that bind us."

In time, Broderick gazed from Kane's transcriptions back to Anjanae's grave. Then impulsively, a brisk wind rose in the north. Subsequently, it died down to a gentle breeze. As though apprehending he was expected to emulate its patterns, Broderick inhaled and exhaled slowly, letting go of his grief.

Without question, I viewed the aforementioned measures as a sign of healing and even atonement. But as much as I realize this need for curative measures, I am also compelled to underscore a fact which is no less important. That is, the realization of exactly *who*, needs to lead the charge. That means law enforcement, public officials, members of the presumed "elite" community and a broader society.

It is safe to conclude that the healing process involves apologies, expressions of regret; the willingness to right wrongs. But far too often, Black people are looked upon to spearhead this march. I likened the irrationality of requiring Black people to adjudicate the wrongs imposed by a privileged people and an oppressive regime, to the riveting stanza of Autumn Redcross's poem, *Death Passes Twice*, wherein she writes "In this historic moment, our Black sons can be beaten/Maimed, shot and left for dead—/To no serious consequence for the murderous/Bureaucracy offering too few indictments/...and no regret" (Yancy, 151).

That aside, I think too, that Black people are the last ones in need of encouragement to love and embrace healing. It is no secret that in many circles, Black people yet joke about the fact that

Amber Guyer, the former police officer guilty of killing Botham Jean, was given a bible by Judge Tammy Kemp, and asked for a hug by Botham Jean's brother, Brandt Jean. It almost seems inherent that this notion of caring more about people than we do about ourselves is ingrained. Perhaps it stems from those inglorious days of America's greatest sins, when certain Black people controversially loved their slaveowners more than they loved themselves.

I believe it is worth noting too, that the talk and any notion of healing is futile in the absence of viewing each alleged Black suspects, whether culpable or wrongly accused, as though they could have been our own child. Allowances must be made for the fact that the kid may have been a victim of undesirable circumstances. Likewise, an understanding of the trials that *any child* might face with so limited knowledge of life or the bad circumstances by which they were predisposed.

I believe Carl Upchurch, author of *Convicted in the Womb*, puts it best wherein he opined, "Patterns of social and economic and political immorality produced the environment that spawned me, I now know, and I'm mad as hell about what was done to that little boy and to millions of kids like him before and since" (Carl Upchurch, XIX).

Bearing Witness

As I was constructing the framework for *The Talk*, and reflecting upon all the key teachable moments from my two-plus years of studying creative writing, my memory backtracked to some of the most invaluable lessons I had learned about writing poetry and prose manuscripts. Chief among them, was the goal of effectively bearing witness, documenting the perils of others in a way that ably reflect the extremity of their suffering—that is to say, the ills of war, slavery, domestic violence, hunger, mass incarceration, unjustified lethal use of force or other means of inhumanity.

I believe Robyn Creswell's February 2014, article in the *New Yorker*, ably expresses my sentiments when she writes that "The Poetry of Witness" includes many works by...women's-rights

advocates and critics of slavery, “motivated by their willingness to denounce religious or political injustice” (Creswell, 3).

Sequentially, this unique form of writing triggered a reflection upon two occurrences in ancient history; specifically, the expressions of two key figures, a notorious Spartan king and an esteemed wartime colonel. At the battle of Thermopylae (480 BC), King Leonidas instructed one of his captains to deliver his final orders to the counsel. “Tell them our story. Make every Greek know what happened here” (Gordon, 85). Over 2000 years later, in a similar fashion, Colonel Robert Gould Shaw, at the battle of Fort Wagner, SC, (1863), would turn over his letters to a war journalist with the instructions, “If I should fall, remember what you see here”(Ayubsalim, 2016).

The idea is that if recorded effectively, something quite remarkable should transpire. To be more precise, rather it is poetry or in this case, a prose manuscript, whatever body of work that we writers pen, should ably serve as a tool for bearing witness. More than just words on a page, it should move our readership with its captivating power, awakening and eliciting an emotional response that calls out to a myriad of consciences to rise up and take action.

I aspire that *The Talk* achieves such intensity, that it compels its readers to strive for transformation not only within themselves but also in the world around them, that it becomes nothing short of a radical body of work, a form of bearing witness in such an extreme way that it changes lives by exposing injustice and inspiring collective activism.

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Prologue

Glenrock's searing heat, the night of July 4, 2012, draped across the atmosphere like a leaden curtain, stiffly creased, downward drawn. Not even a torrential downpour could provide blessed relief. Raging rain, only seemed to amplify the blistering effects that clung to the skin like hot steam. In the distance, an intermittent burst of fireworks lit up Paterson's black sky; vivid streaks of red, white, and blue. But even such colorful explosions were lost in the oppressive summer heat.

Every protracted breath felt like inhaling through a blowtorch, scorching air burning the lungs; nasal passages succumbing to a thick acrid smell of singed flesh. The wet, torrid night was a harbinger of what was to come; a portent of oppressed people pushed beyond their breaking point, lifeblood slowly siphoned away. Entire lives lived under pressure powerful enough to crack even the sturdiest of resolves. Bodies thrashed by corrupt cops, motionless shells of sons and daughters' corpses strewn about Paterson's streets. Lives ended with little more than fabricated proclamations of "I was in fear for my life" and Paterson's corrupt cops expeditiously acquitted by juries full of old white men in tailored suits. Among those staunchly exonerated, was Paterson's Police Department's fiercest enforcer, who had seen and done more than his share of dirty deeds.

Glenrock was his home, Paterson - his beat. He'd be damned if any of the cockroaches from Paterson's slummy high-rises or hooligans roaming its drug-addled ghettos would ever invade his pristine suburb. Only way he saw fit to thwart any such infiltration, was to don the uniform of a Patterson cop, patrol its borders with an eagle eye.

Just a week ago, his ire and call-to-duty was leveled upon the few scoundrels from South Paterson's famous Little Istanbul District, loitering in the streets in one of Glenborough's subdivision, smoking their blunts like typical base-heads. Pants sagging on their hips, some even low enough to show their dingy drawers. Already upon them, he yelled to the three black boys, "Get your asses on

the sidewalk!” They weren’t moving fast enough, so he unholstered, waved his gun in a sweeping motion. “That means, now!”

“Man, fuck that pig!” One of them whispered under his breath.

“The fuck you say to me?” It was all over in a flash, the rough hand of his brutal grip stapled to the boy’s throat like it was riveted there; released only when the kid’s eyes began to roll.

“I catch you around here again, I’m gonna beat the black off of your asses!”

This was reticent of his modus operandi. Countless black voices rendered useless up against his clenched jaws; his unmitigated gall, his iron fist, his imbalanced reign over law-and-order, looming above them like an unforgiving god.

There was a need for a smoldering heatwave, brimstony embers that glow in darkness, desperation for a combustible fury that shook the very foundation of New Jersey. A rallying call for justice rippling through Paterson like unstoppable wildfires, eventually reaching Glenrock, entrenching death’s icy touch within its fortified walls. An expediency for turning up the heat on unchecked trespasses; a sense of urgency for revelations that acts committed by sinister characters reverberated through the universe and left its mark on their future - balancing debts either in this life, or the next.

But July’s suffocating heat wasn’t just about weather, it was about its prophetic ability to subsidize the deadly desecrations of a dark-skinned people squeezed to the Nth degree. At long last, an eviscerated race had witnessed a twenty-year veteran cop reap what he had sewn. Alas, with a bitter twist of irony, it was a notorious drug-dealer - a black man’s equally sadistic disposition - who delivered the final deathblow to the cop’s most prized possession, his 16-year-old child. Indisputably, in that singular occurrence, a cop had justification, a worthier cause for exterminating a brother; no doubt, an entitled reciprocity that was due him. A black community would never begrudge him that, even if there was no room for leeway on his other misdeeds.

There was also the perception that two truths could coexist, the gnawing pain within a black community that comes with a conviction that certain monstrosities are never permissible, most of all, the death of an innocent 16-year-old child. A reality exasperated by the aching realness that at times, innocent children pay the ultimate price for the sins of their henchman fathers. At the same time, none of it negated a staunch belief that Black people were so deserving of that one wrinkle in time, that reciprocal turn of event, forcing the arc of justice to bend in their favor.

Officer Max Judah Kane, perceived this veracity, as much as he had fathomed the unalterableness of the grisly scene before him; a scene of utter desolation, a collage of unspeakable savagery. As though he had known all along, a reciprocal fate would eventually befall him, pierce the outer layers of his thick skin, bludgeon his cold-blooded demeanor with the fiercest of reckoning. The sight of his little girl's broken body - so still, so violated - brought to fruition the terrible veracity that he had sensed all along; suspected but demeaned. An intense foreboding echoed through his subconscious, acidic bile welled up inside him, threatening to spill out, torture everything in its path. He bellowed into the night, "Just look what that MOTHERFUCKER did to my baby girl!"

Pausing a beat, he stumbled through his monologue between Jada, God, and himself. In a voice trembling with regret, he managed to stammer out, "I'm sorry I couldn't save you. I really TRIED!" He uttered feebly, "What am I gonna tell Rita? She gonna be mad at me. Maybe even, mad at you!" He bit back a scream of anguish. "Maybe on my way home - I crash and die."

He screamed at the all-powerful force in the sky, "YOU up there pulling all the strings! Controlling the levers! HOW the fuck could you have allowed this BULLSHIT to happen?"

A choked sob escaped him as he continued reluctantly to Jada, "I know you wish for me not to despise that monster." His voice grew louder in defiance, "You CANNOT ask that of me, Babygirl. To not hate him? That, I CANNOT do!"

Chapter 1. Daughter's Demise

Wednesday, July fourth, 2012, 11:40 PM

'No matter what happens Dad, no more bloodshed.'

Officer Max Judah Kane, glared through those icy-blue eyes. Expressions intense and unwavering, almost like a predator staring down its prey. The partly soaked sheet of paper trembled in his hands, threatened to dissolve beneath his touch. His counter-reaction to the whole damn scene, the bloody mess of it all, was in major disarray. His mind veered into a tangled web of roles and responses - be a father, be a cop, or be Kane. Lash out in indignation, drown in desolation, or remain icy and aloof from it all.

Undeniably speaking, Paterson's fiercest watchdog, all 6'4 of him, cut a tall and daunting figure. His menacing authority commanded respect without the need for words. More than that, was his salt 'n' pepper hair, slicked back like Jimmy Hoffa's; his rain-slicked face a chiseled sculpture of granite, with lines deeply etched into his skin. Instinctively, he had thrown on his usual getup - a black windbreaker with "PNPD" stitched in gold letters, worn over dark grey trousers. The ensemble featured a badge and gun glinting with an almost celestial aura against the darkness. His feet nestled into the leather of ankle-high boots and his ball cap crowned him like an impenetrable helmet, creating the image of a formidable, Billy Badass.

Everything about the veteran cop exuded a potent magnetism. The air around him, always charged with electricity; one wrong move, could set off a dangerous spark. As if each syllable of his own name were synonymous with 'Sir Charles-in-charge'. He had that kind of domino effect, especially when he walked through the doors of any joint. So damn large and in charge, he filled it up. No room left for anyone who didn't have half a brain to make room for themselves. People began to fall away, disperse to their neutral corners.

Whispers of, "Oh shit! That's him—that's motherfuckin' Max!" While other voices echoed

in confirmation, “He ain't the one to be fucked with. He straight-up bad news man!”

Heretofore, the seasoned cop's framework had been unbreakable. Like there was an alternate version of all things in which he reigned supreme. Basically speaking, at 46 years of age, and 20-years on the force, nothing had shaken his resolve. That all changed with the scene outside Shipley's Auto & Appliance Warehouse. Around them, deep shadows coiled around the compound, winding like serpents and blocking out what little light the night offered. Dirt and gravel, engrossed with an oppressive amount of moisture due to heavy rain. The submerged landscape in front of them rivaled the Nile, bloodied and ridden with dead fish. At the same time, it was coated with the metallic smell of his 16-year-old daughter's blood.

In that one sudden moment, Kane's shoulders sagged, knees buckled, eyes glazed over; an unprecedented deportment pervaded itself as though he had been reduced, right there in that spot, to half the man his size.

Once more, he ran his fingers along the note, battered by rain, and blood. So many creases crisscrossing, all of them indicative of the many times the paper was folded and unfolded. Bracing himself for the remaining bombshells, Kane's eyes ran down the page, to the next line of rightward slanting texts. It said:

'Should I succumb to this assassin's bullets, spilling the blood of another innocent black man, out of revenge, will not bring me back. Nor, will it ease your pain Dad.'

Words with gusto, and punctuation marks that packed a pummeling punch. Knowing the personality behind those highly-flavored lines, Kane's eyes shifted from the lifeless form cradled in his arms, to the strokes of the pen. In certain places its blue ink had run but only slightly. In others, there were unmistakable signs it'd intermittently exploded; a stark barometer of how Jada's blood had likewise ebbed, and profusely flowed.

His face drained of its color like an invisible siphon had pulled all life away. Breath hitched

in his throat. Then came that low, grainy groan. A sound so faint, it was barely there. Time that followed may have been seconds, minutes, or even hours. What felt like an eternity passed in the blink of an eye. But then too, he had sequestered himself in a universe where time no longer mattered. That would be the reason why, from that night forward, he would hate watches, an ever-present reminder of time's grinding pace and relentless unpredictability. Its maddening rhythm, a never-ending reminder of how easily life could change on a dime.

Had he to guess, he had been sitting there for what seemed like forever. In that cross-legged position, Jada's body sagging, her lifeless limbs flopping over his own like a grotesque puppet. His baby girl's fragile body ravaged by unspeakable violence; the rain hammering a staccato rhythm against her broken, battered flesh. The crimson-red fluid pooled around them, mixed with the rain in a sickening symbiosis, making it difficult to tell where one ended and the other began.

Checking her from head-to-toe, he ran his hands over her cold skin, futilely, for any sign, any beat. He put his ear to her mouth, listening for that one last breath - nothing heard. He searched the small of Jada's back, her armpits, everywhere he could think to check until finally coming up empty handed. The wounds she had sustained had clearly done their damage. A bloody gash had left a baseball-sized stain in the center of her cream-colored knitted summer blouse, dripping down to her baggy blue jeans, trickling in thin streaks down both arms.

His mind back-tracked. The scene replayed in slow-mo, like a reoccurring nightmare, climaxing to that moment it all went down. That fleeting fragment between seconds, unseen, secretive, dim, and without form; in that pause between a thought and its denotation, nuzzled at the precipice between life and death. An aura that something so astonishingly major in scale, so tragically incisive in depth, was about to happen.

The sound of the blast had been deafening, ripped through Glenrock's night air like a cannonball, echoing through the darkness with the force of a stick of dynamite going off. The loud

crack, was followed by a deep rumbling that felt like an earthquake beneath their feet. Max, Jada, and the drug-dealing Cevonté Anthony cringed at the deafening sound; eyes wide, ears ringing.

The skies were ignited with a fiery rage creating an atmospheric pressure of indignation, one of palpable hatred and dread. Scant light petered in and out; an explosion of inky-black feathers filled the air, a flock of birds fleeing their perches in terror.

In cadence, the two startled men, Kane and Anthony, had reacted simultaneously with gunshots. One shot was in desperation, the other, in defiance. Two casualties of their personal war, lay dead. Bullet wounds had marked Jada's skin - one from Kane's Glock-22, another from Anthony's sawed-off shotgun - both reckless, both lethal, both, premature. Whose bullet hit first was unclear, which weapon delivered the fatal shot, unknown. The culminating outcome was death, an irreversible change written in red on light and dark skins; the only silver lining being that Kane's bullet also found its mark in Anthony's forehead, killing him dead.

Mentally detached, Kane could neither move, think, or breathe. In this trance-like state, there was a barrage of gunfire sounding in his eardrums—yet, off in the distance, not a hair on Jada's head was harmed. Like she could walk through bullets as easily as those freaks in Sci-Fi movies passing through raindrops without getting wet.

Subsequently, the sensation shifted; it was as if suffocating air was pushing up from a puddle of scarlet sludge; Kane was stuck in a scorching desert of his own making. And that damn god-awful cotton taste in his mouth. He spat. It lingered. The gooey texture, like licking the back of a stamp, only more intensified.

Shaking off the trance, he gingerly eased Jada's head onto his lap. He reached down, closed her eyelids with a delicate stroke of his thumb. Moving his fingertips back upward, he brushed over the tangled mess of her long, dark hair, noticeably matted with rain and blood. He took such care, as though these small undertakings were final acts of mercy, culminating in that one act of kindness

he could bestow upon her shattered soul.

Just minutes before, Kane had watched his daughter crash to the wet surface, face down. Actually thought he heard the splash well before he saw her body in freefall motion. Recalled having been startled by his own cries of pandemonium, spoken to Anthony's dead body, "Motherfucker, you shot my baby girl!" piercing through the night like a siren call. He had raced over to her. Slid through the rivulet to her side. Rolled her lifeless body over until she was cradled in his arms.

He was thrown back to the night of Jada's birth, and a day later, when he and his wife Rita brought her home from the hospital. He relived the moment they crossed the threshold, Rita's lullaby to the newborn infant cradled in his arms. That evening seemed suspended in perfect stillness. He marveled at life's assorted mysteries. A tiny child wielding that much power over two imposing forces. Who had enough control in her miniature pinky finger to alter the course of their lives. Simply put, a life filled with promises.

At Rita's command, he reluctantly placed her in her crib. Hesitant that it might be insufficiently stocked with the necessities for survival and comfort, he added a care bear, a baby rattle; pulled her blanket tighter. He gently caressed her warm forehead, watched her drift off to sleep. Just knew, that no matter what happened, their daughter would be safe and sound.

Rita, his wife, had finally said, "All right, let's give her some peace and quiet."

"Yeah, yeah," he said while still not moving.

"Don't worry," Rita had reassured. "you'll have plenty of time with Little Ms. Sunshine. "

"You bet your sweet ass I will! She'll never become one of those girls with an absentee father. Not there to protect her when she most needs him."

Rita knowingly warned, "Careful you don't go making promises you can't keep, Max Judah Kane."

"I'll keep it alright."

“Just don't forget that dedication when it comes time for...” Her voice drifted off into an eerie quietness.

Rita looked him square in the eye, her jaw set tight. *Cops' kids are always a target*, she thought, and if he'd done something to cross ‘Johnny Scumbag,’ it would likely be Jada paying the ultimate price. Her head pounded at the idea of all the psychos out there just waiting for a sweet little Jada to dangle as a carrot.

Kane's dimwitted response came out in a stammer, “I...I know! Diaper duty, bo-bottle washing, the whole nine!”

Rita Kane's eyes flared with impatience as she sneered, “Oh, wow. To you, the general welfare of your kid really boils down to bottles and shitty diapers huh Max? How downright heartwarming. Good for you. Now out ya go!” Her words had seemed like a whip, striking him with its severity.

Kane put his hands on his hips and gazed down at Jada once again. He finally turned, headed for the door. Stopped dead in his tracks. Looked back at Jada with a contented yet hesitant smile.

Rita exclaimed insistently, “Do you comprehend, the words, I am saying? She needs, to, sleep some.”

“Yeah, yeah. You’re probably right about that.”

He said this last, easing from the room. The door having popped shut, he leaned against it. Felt a smile spread across his mug. Through the walls, he imagined Jada curled up in a soft mass of blankets. Eyes moving under the lids as she dreamed of something happy and peaceful.

Kane snapped back into the present, a chill running down his spine. Years of denial came crashing down like lethal tumor cells, out from hiding. Each detail, the long before and short after, ringing with the reverberations of former misdeeds coming back to haunt. Victim always paying the ultimate price for the perpetrator's colossal fuckups, just as Rita had knowingly warned.

Owing to this fact, were echoes of his past failings, foolish choices which caused a rift between him and his baby girl. Painful pangs seized him as he remembered the unwisely chosen personal battles; the savage fights; her identity and independence, at stake. He had tried to dictate it all: her right to love whomever she chose regardless of gender or skin tone or sexual orientation. Who she could include in her circle, or try to advocate for; which black causes she could champion, those she had to oppose. It never ended well. Every confrontation felt like a world-war III, every thoughtless word he said a dagger to her heart.

Jada usually never bit her tongue, but something about her 16-year-old insight had grown tenfold, in the months prior to her demise. For reasons unknown, she had suddenly become all in for “the brothers.” Didn't care who knew it either. And let Kane tell it, it wasn't just any old dark chocolate in a black hoodie. Nuh-uh, she had a type. The bagboy type; the type that had more arrests than birthdays. Had to be the kind of scoundrel who was in penal institutions so often they might as well had of been on the payroll. The strong and arrogant type that exuded power and dominance, with a cool, shit-eating grin, and bullshit dripping like honey from their lips.

Such allegiance threw Kane for a loop. Though, he swore the bad habit would be short-lived. After all, he had insisted his kid was an exact replica of him through and through - although she always denied it. He had often told her, “You're better than these jack-booted thugs out here! So much more Jada, than these street-niggahs, whose case you're always pleading. Face it baby girl, you're a chip off the old block.”

He had dismissed the snarky retort, “I am nothing like you!”

Though the words were spat out heatedly, meant to cut him to the quick, Kane was used to this dance between them. Knew, it was fleeting, all kneejerk reaction fueled by anger and raw emotion. A few benevolences here, some extra allowance there, another extension of curfew, here and there, and her fatherly love would be restored, post haste and many times over.

With a sigh, Kane heaved himself back to the present situation. Trying his damndest to suppress the unbridled guilt over forcing her to confront a darkness he, nor she could ever outrun, Kane spewed the unthinkable.

“You were always one to follow dreams, stars, and spaceships, Jada. Now, if only those same tenets could raise you from the dead.”

To his disappointment, the dark humor failed to disguise the cruel irrevocability of death. Fate had already decided the course; it's foretelling, as precise as the line of tragic grief registered across his face. With grief, came a press of guilt, prodding him to better enlighten his child's dead spirit.

“What I meant to say baby girl was, whereas you saw solidarity among races, I saw danger in a world of lawlessness and my role in keeping you safe! Which apparently, I've fucked up.”

He hung his head, taking a deep breath before continuing, “I taught you in a perfect way, that I was imperfect.”

With the weight of such confessions bearing down on him, Kane began to detest the sight and touch of the paper, which struck division cold as death between him and his daughter. Jada's abhorrence to his brutal murder of one, Kareem Marquis Tyson, automatically swam back to his mind. Two years to the day, he had chased the little punk for nearly a half-mile. From the Hess Mini-Mart, down East 42nd Street, onto Ellison Plaza. He remembered yelling out to the kid, at least a few times, “Stop, or I'll shoot your black ass!”

Over his shoulders, he had heard a barrage of interrogations from Tyson's cohorts. The ringleader, a thick, dark-skinned girl, with purple hair, long, thick eyelashes, and “Call-Me-Nia” tattooed across her breast had asked, “Why the fuck are you chasing him?”

Her sidekick, Jamal, wondered out loud, “Yeah, what'd he do?”

“Man, he probably ain't do shit!” commented a thin boy sporting a thick Afro and a killer's

scowl on his pale brown face.

“That’s fucked up though,” declared another of their homies, a much older-looking kid.

Nia finally asked her sidekicks, “Yo', I know y'all recording this shit right?”

Through wheezes and gasps, Kane had bellowed, “Better shut the fuck up; stay out of it or you'll be next.”

“Next? *Next* for what exactly?” Nia demanded both not expecting or getting a response.

Tyson eventually ran out of steam at Martin Luther King High, stumbling to a halt in the shadow of its badly burnt grass, its patches overgrown by weeds, and faded red brick exterior tagged with graffiti. To the boy’s left, a raggedy basketball hoop sagged on one post, the parking lot surrounding it, littered with busted stones and shards of broken glass.

Completely depleted of all energy, Tyson’s dark skin stretched tight across his bones, his deep-set eyes seemingly etched with years of toil and suffering, despite his youth. As Kane closed in on him, Tyson glanced around and saw no escape route—not from the racist cop, no way to outrun his own skin color, no means of dodging the inescapable wall of death coming right at him.

For his part, any empathy Kane might have summoned had already been spent on his last three victims. It was no secret his bullet was the reason one black kid was now confined to a wheelchair, and his unconventional chokehold, the cause of another being braindead from asphyxiation. Nonetheless, their lives had been spared; albeit, not in its original form; or, with the same functionalities.

Kane’s third victim came just two weeks shy of his dustup with Tyson, wherein Kane found himself caught up in a peculiarly rare show of compassion--or maybe it was ulterior motives. That was the day he cornered a little 14-year-old, saturnine youth; a lanky black kid who called himself 'Shadow,' so name, because his skin tone was the color of soot.

Kane claimed he had the kid dead to rights on petty larceny, stealing cigarillos from Omars Krazy Rilla Smokeshop, just up Main Street in Paterson's west side. After slamming Shadow's face up against the redbrick wall outside Krazy Rilla, Kane locked him in handcuffs with one click, held them there for about 30 seconds with his hot, panting breath on the nape of the boy's neck.

Then in a flash, and without *raison d'être*, Kane loosened the restraints he had on him and with an abrupt jerk, spun Shadow around. There was something in his eyes that made the kid think the cop had plans bigger than just catching a little fish. The drastic change of direction was almost freakish.

Kane sneered, "Now go on, get your fucking black ass out of here!"

"Wait, what? You lettin' me go cop?" Shadow asked nervously, squirming and rubbing circulation back into his wrist.

Kane snatched the boy up by the collar of his sweats, pulled him close, forehead-to-forehead. He scoffed, "Letting you go? No, you little dumbfuck! I could give two shits about your black-ass's freedom!"

Setting his jaw in determination, he looked Shadow dead in the eye and said menacingly, "See, the way I see it, the next little motherfucker like you I see doing wrong, is gonna pay double--for your shit, and his too! And his slimy, stinking blood gonna be on your hands." Kane paused for dramatic effect before adding with a sneer, "Now, get the fuck outta here before I change my mind!"

That "empathetic" moment was more than could be said for what stood before him now. Meaning, this sewer rat who was about to bestow upon him that one elusive notch on his belt. The coveted trophy that came with peeling a Niggah's cap; singing him a lullaby, sending him to join the whisperers.

Did not help matters that Tyson's scrawny black ass reeked of criminal mischief. He wore prohibited gang wear—red hoodie pulled down tight and red sagging pants that showed his

drawers—and radically amplified, the bullseye on his chest. What's worst, the 'little mobster' had flipped the object sideways. Kane could see a glint of metal – it looked like a .38 revolver, but then again it didn't. It mattered none though. The die had been cast.

“Wait!”

“Wait my ass Slick! It's too late! Now it's, bye-bye!

“How you gonna just up and shoot a kid? And my mama sick too. I'm all she got.”

“You should've thought of that before you decided to test the long arm of the law!”

“But this ain't no gun Yo!” Tyson instinctively warned, skittishly displaying the gadget.

Kane sarcastically imitated a dialect he deemed to be blackish. “Like I said, Homey, ya' should of seen this comin'! Least, ya mama, or trifling-ass daddy, or them shady busters down the block, should of said somethin'. Given your ass “the talk!” he spat out in a patronizing voice, pointing his finger and wagging it vehemently.

“Apparently, they didn't—just let yo bitch'ass run wild thinkin' that this world's not gonna bite back. Well guess what Teapot? They were wrong! Ain't nobody out here gonna play babysitter for a bunch 'a ghettofabulous low lives. Yawl out here, livin' life on your own terms and sipping' away at society's resources, like it ain't nothin' but a damn thing! Bottom line is that disrespectin' law an' order ain't no game—should of recognized this before shit hit the fan!”

“Cop what da fuck is you talkin' about? Look dude, I done told you, it's a selfie...” Tyson gestured to the object in his hand. Another flicker of bright light, another futile declaration of, “It ain't no...”

His voice trailed off at the sight of Kane's arm coiled to its apex for the draw. Tyson screamed, this time his voice grainy, in do-or-die mode; adrenaline released in one loud, epic cry.

“Ya' need, to calm, da fuck down man!”

Before the next syllable could leave Tyson's lips, the sound of Kane's Glock-22 had roared.

A thick plume of smoke rose from its muzzle. With a flash of light, lead blazed through the air like a supernova, releasing a flurry of bullets. Fragments tore through Tyson like an unstoppable force, shredding flesh from bone, splintering marrow, and painting the scene red. A familiar stench of gunpowder and death lingered in the air, mixed with the faint hint of sulfur and burnt tangerine.

Kane had achieved perfection. In his mind, he had reduced another tar baby down to nothing more than a pile of bloodied flesh and bones. Told himself, he probably did the miscreant's mother a solid too.

Seconds later, the cop was kneeling beside what appeared to be Tyson's lifeless body. Eyeballing the selfie stick, Kane yelled, "Fuck me!" then instinctively patted the small of his back for the unregistered firearm (the drop gun). He was easing the .38 out when the Motley Crew from earlier resurfaced, out of nowhere, like a bad smell.

Nia, his thorn in his side, yelled, "Hell-to-the-no Dawg!" Patting her chest, and the sides of her camouflaged pants, she blurted out aloud, "Fuck! Where my damn phone at?" Digging the device out from deep in her top-heavy bosom, she threatened, "Go ahead, I dare you crooked-ass cop!"

"The shit you talking? See? Handcuffs," Kane advised, dangling the restraints in midair.

"Cuffs? He dead ain't he? What the fuck you need cuffs for?"

Teed off at his archenemy espousing such pervasive factualities, Kane shot to his feet fast and furious as if launched by a rocket; fist clenched, and knuckles whitened around his firearm. When he did, Nia and friends, were staring down the barrel of a Glock-22 and no doubt a bullet with their names written all over it. Sweeping the firearm from one to the next, he yell, "All of you, fucking disperse, now!" The crew flitted like ants retreating to their mounds.

Reverencing the potential fallout of Nia's errant malice, Kane opted against the drop gun and feigned compassion instead. Reassuming his kneeling position, he fingered Tyson's neck for a carotid artery. He felt a pulse that was faint and thready; little if any sign of life. And then.

As if confronted by a ghostly apparition, Kane unwound like a tightly coiled spring at the boy's deep inhalation; his forcing that one last ounce of breath; the site of pale red blood bubbling between his teeth; his final utterances, "You may have killed the body cop; but you ain't kilt my soul."

Later that day, Kane was matter-of-fact in his explanations to the IA Agent, Jameson Tubbs; a frail-looking, beardless, pock-faced kid twenty years his junior, who had just rolled off the cop assembly line just shy of a year ago.

"A cop has a split second to calculate the risks, him or me, that's all. So it had to be him. That was the most logical conclusion."

Treading lightly, Tubbs asked, "Oh, it's like that?"

"Better to be judged by *twelve*, than carried by six," Kane said matter-of-fact.

"Just that cut and dry, huh Sarge?"

"Yeah, it is. Besides, he ran! A black kid running from the long arm of the law spells trouble. As you can see," he said poking the photo of Tyson's corpse, "the kind that's deadly."

"Deadly, for whom? "Know what, no need to answer that. I think I got all I need."

Though the unseasoned IA agent had begrudgingly acquiesced; hours later, Kane's rationale to his own kid had proven far less convincing. There was no sense of unrestrained relief that her old man was still alive rather than some unlucky stiff, soon to be buried under 750 pounds of dirt. He knew that with Jada, it was all about blame games and guilt trips. Her misguided devotion to what her old man had dispassionately stereotyped as *Spades* and *Jungle bunnies*, came with the most intense interrogations.

She was already riding his heels when he burst through the door, headed for the kitchen; the Glock-22 in his shoulder holster; a .38 tucked into the small of his back. When he turned to face her, there was that smug look on his face, which always invited trouble. Jada's gaze cut away; her attention

drawn to something far more nerve-wracking than her father's all-too-familiar 'Do you know who I am?' bravado. She swallowed hard, cringing at the splotches of dried blood that stained his badge, smudges of it on his black and gold uniform t-shirt.

Taking a deep breath, she sighed, then poignantly asked, “Just wondering Dad. By any chance, did you consider his mom before you shot him, six times?”

Kane stared at her incredulously, as if he'd never seen anything like her before. Hadn't crossed his mind he had brought remnants of his most recent kill into their home; but it did occur to him that the girl must be hammered on something illegal. Either that, or watched too much hyped-up news, be it US Muslim Network, The World News Network (TWNN), or any other type of bullshit, blackspaining, anti-cop channel.

“Kid, what the hell are you talking about?” He said with that look of self-righteous indignation.

Bullied by a quick flame that had leaped into her eyes, Kane fortified his response with, “It's about self-preservation Jada, something you'd do well to learn.”

Amending his earlier rhetoric to IA, he repeated, “And I'd rather be judged by *one* than carried by six.”

“So you really thought a kid holding a selfie stick posed that much of a threat. Enough to do you in?”

Kane paused a beat. Reality of the situation aside, the inquiry had hit more like an interrogation. As though, she had given him life, and not the other way around. Cold sweat trickled down his face. Finally, he let out a deep, guttural breath. That was about all she was gonna get.

Snatching a metal basin from the cupboard, he lifted the lever on an adjacent faucet allowing the swirling, cool stream to flow. With downcast eyes, the veteran cop examined his shaking hands before easing them into the water as though he expected the presence of Tyson's smeared blood to

still be there.

“You cannot just wash it off Dad, what’s done, is done!”

Kane quickly spun around to confront her, his movements frenzied and wild. He stepped close enough to her face, that their noses almost touched. Baring his teeth, he snarled, “What’a fuckedup and nasty thing to say! Not only is it asinine, but also incredibly stupid!”

Pouring himself a drink of Makers Mark, Kane took a gulp then asked, “And exactly whose side are you on anyway?”

“The side of right and wrong Dad. Or, did they neglect to teach you that during your days at the academy?”

“What they taught me young lady, is that risking my life is never an option, especially when it’s a lowlife from some ghettotfabulous hood.”

“Would it have been an *option* if he was white? What if that kid was me Dad?”

Suddenly then it hit him, the crude imageries of how Jada must have spent those final hours. The dread of each passing second, every waking moment; that paralyzing sense of death looming like a swinging pendulum. Above all else, her last-ditch effort to forewarn him of the reckoning that comes with killing so promiscuously.

Seeing the marred, broken body of his lifeless sixteen year old, his mind was flooded with the most strident, prophetic axioms: past actions dictating present consequences; echo responding to the call; sowing the wind and reaping the whirlwind. Hearing that poignant question reverberate over and over again, ‘What if that kid was me Dad?’ immobilized him where he sat, dripping wet with rain and coated with his daughter’s blood.

Chapter 2. Abandoned Warehouse

Wednesday, July fourth, 2012, 10:50 PM

The abandoned warehouse, formerly known as Shipley's Parts and Appliance, stood off to the left of CR 504, a two-lane road on the outskirts of New Jersey's Glenrock Boroughs. Enclosed within a rickety, chain-link fence which was as dry rotted and chapped as the thickets peeking out from among a backdrop of trees, the rough-hewn reddened aluminum building fit the profile of a relic—rusted, dank, and decaying from decades of neglect. Lone on a patch of dirt and gravel, its reddened aluminum sidings jutted lazily towards the skyline like an embattled Goliath in solitary confinement.

Closing in on the shadowy, run-down structure, Kane felt like a hovering spirit chauffeuring himself to death's door. He stopped. Killed the lights. Heaved a breath. Glimpsing upwards, he traced the power lines which snaked across the building plugging into neighboring poles. Doubtingly, he listened for a hum or buzz; anything to chase away the raw semblance of death; anything to reassure that salvaging his daughter's life was yet possible.

Exiting the vehicle, slow and easy, he surveilled the surroundings, before making his way to the other side. Sliding the flashlight beam up the side of the building, he noticed a dead baby raven, under the roof's peak. Laying limp and bendy, it practically dangled from its nest. There was a gash to the right side of its head; a ring of blood pooling around its neck. The seasoned cop seem shaken by the death of such a minuscule lifeform. He had seen, and actually caused, far worst in his time on the force: disfigured bodies, castrated limbs, blown off heads. But never once pictured those kills forecasting things to come, as this conquered game, did now.

Across the way, a streetlight was on, a bit diffused by the intermingling of light drizzle and grey fog misting downward in front. It hummed a droning tune, flickered, went out, then snapped back on.

He made his way back to the SUV and awaited what seemed like the inevitable face off. Seconds later, the double doors to the warehouse pushed open with a swooshing sound. Through it emerged a giant-sized, scruffy looking dark-skin figure, in a long, black trench coat, skullcap, and combat boots. In front of the man, a terrified Jada staggered, restrained by the weighted arm of the ruthless force across her chest. The crass sound to his baritone voice reverberated, rolling like thunder across the stormiest of nights.

“Muthafucka, you got my products!”

The booming voice matched the one he had heard two days earlier on the telephone.

“It’s in the vehicle!” Kane responded in a hoarse voice that could easily replicate the war-ravaged intonation of army generals.

“Hell no dawg, I gotta see. Know what I’m sayin’?”

“First, you let her go!” Kane yelled, a bit mortified at how his futile command, though forcefully released, sounded trite to his own ears.

“Nah fool, you know it don’t work like dat. Let me see my shit!”

In hesitant compliance, Kane turned, slow walked a few paces, jerked open the SUV’s door, nearly tearing it off its hinges, retrieved two blocks of white powder Cocaine, and turned back toward the abductor.

Lifting the packages above his head, he yelled, “Okay, now, release her!”

“Fool who you think yo’ bitch-ass talking to? You know good and goddamn well I’ll do dis’ bitch, sure as shit!”

In a jerking movement, Anthony pinned Jada closer, fortifying his grip; his brawny arms an anaconda that could squeeze every bit of life out of her soul. Jada’s hair, wet and tangled below his grasp, made Kane wonder about all the tight spots he was not there to get her out of. The bruised knee from baseball the busted lip from soccer; the bout with pneumonia that almost ended it all for

her at age ten. For all the good he could do here tonight, he might as well have absented himself from this more pitiable scene.

At that point, the situation went off kilter. Witnessing the fear hovering in his little girl's eyes created in Kane a demented spirit. Worst more, was his sensing beyond Jada's desolation, the assurance that her dad would get her out of harm's way.

Gripped with trepidation that he might fail to rescue her from yet another disparaging moment; may again falter in awakening her from another nightmare, Kane snapped. The blocks of cocaine fell to the ground causing a rippling splash in the water accumulating around his boots. He bent down, simulating his retrieval of the dope, only to disguise his next move. Jerking the Glock-22 from his side, he bolted upright, took aim at the transgressor, who now had repositioned the sawed off shotgun to Jada's temple.

"You let her go! Right now!" he yelled, sounding increasingly militant and less pedestrian in his tone. Not one to fool himself, the twenty-year veteran cop recognized, resolutely, that it was the gun doing the talking.

"Or what muthafucka? Fool, you must 'of forgot who runn'n this shit! Now throw me dat piece or Ah'll off this bitch, sure as shit!"

Everything went still. At that moment there were no sounds. No movement. No onlookers. None other than the three, Kane, Jada, and the outlaw, existing in that un-redemptive version of hell. Even the rain had drifted into an ominous state of quietness. Then, unpredictably, the perp pushed Jada toward the wet asphalt like she was a useless, worthless, rag doll. Miraculously, she regained some semblance of balance. Staying upright, Jada ran toward her savior; her white light.

By that time, the sawed-off was aimed straight at her back. Its trigger cocked; its safety off; its handler, resolute. The scene was horrifically daunting; two sides locked in an outsized battle of will,

a campaign of life or death, the abductee, the unwilling participant, their casualty of war.

Unannounced, unexpectedly, and without preemptive warning came the element of surprise. At that mind-blowing moment, that edge that separates the real from the unreal, a blast in the distance with a ferocity beyond comprehension. Its deafening discharge rang through the night air.

The explosion, too powerful, too untimely; too deadly, to go unnoticed. In cadence the two startled men fired their weapons; a red shell ejected from the sawed off; the Glock-22 recoiled, expelling a round of its own.

“Jada!” Kane called out in distress; the melodious wind echoing his howling cry.

Jada’s eyes went wide in shock as she stumbled. Her pace slowed to a frail limp. Her cream-colored knit shirt saturated with burnt orange blood ; the gaping hole in her chest; a blast to her back. For a split second longer she dragged forward, toward her white light, and then collapsed, face down.

Sprinting toward her, Kane cried out to the dead assailant, “Motherfucker, you shot my baby!”

The shriek of his voice, out of control; his obliviousness to his probable hand in his daughter’s death, palpable. The terror in his eyes spelt revenge; the hatred in his scream, retribution; both pledges stridently echoing in the night’s air. The surviving avenger was unconscious of his inaudibility to the two dead corpses.

In the distance, his daughter’s captive lay sprawled on the ground; the slug having exited Jada’s chest straight into his exploded head. Still, vengeance was not sufficiently exacted in his mind, nor palatable in his mouth. His thirst had not been quenched; his ravenous appetite, unappeased. In that instant Kane realized, it would be that way until all who bore his fellow assassins’ likeness, met their violent end.

Clipping the strands from her knit shirt, Kane whispered, “Baby Girl, I beg your forgiveness. Because I already know, keeping your last wishes is not a vow I can make, or even abide by.”

Chapter 3. Staying Alive

Friday, July fourth, 2014, 9:00 AM

Detective Anjanae Bridges had been seeing pieces of the city from her apartment window; the restored church of Saint Nicholas dating all the way back to the 17th century; a massive white Cathedral, caddy corner to it, its stone a glinting mass of exuberance. She took in the dog walkers and workout enthusiasts across the street at Bickford Park, the miniature safari just up the block with an exotic bird exhibit featuring colorful avians. From that side of town, a distinctively sweet tincture of Neem leaves drifts through the air.

She absorbed it all, knowing that for Black people, the ambiance comes with certain conditions, and an invitation required to partake in the amenities, and a rigid philosophy which covers many levels of black behavior. She shifted her focus a little further south, across a railroad track, back to her modest neighborhood. The streets were dotted with potholes, broken 40 ounce bottles, and used syringes. There was a distinct and unpleasant smell of stagnancy and dirty ventilation, mixed with the faint odor of contaminated water, garbage and decay.

She inclined her head to the sound of hands shuffling through garbage, the sound of broken glass crunching underfoot. Among the wreckage, stood downtrodden patrons, worn from hardship and struggle, scuffling in the streets displacing their rage onto each other for lack of a more appropriately aimed source.

She observed the beleaguered black-owned AME church a few blocks up Rutledge avenue where hoodlums loiter, window washing and swapping prison stories and is convinced nothing is ever quite as majestic for Black people; life happens to them while the esteemed comes up in the world, are allowed to make and remake themselves. Something about the utter banality of the urban experience humbled her. She swallowed it all.

“Hey ma, don’t forget, I’m gonna be out at the park, me, Tank, and Lloyd,” Broderick said.

Detective Anjanae Bridge’s nerves were shot! A frown of uncertainty squirmed across her forehead. By *park*, her son meant the infamous Virginia and Otis Cobb Memorial Park on the southside. Aka, where the average young black men go to die! And, it wasn’t that she didn’t like his friends, Tank and Lloyd, it’s just their presentations were too cool and overtly ghettofabulous! Whereas Tank was a legendary bad-ass with too much street cred and an unwavering swagger, Lloyd was too flashy and blatantly animated. They were the quintessential magnets for racist cops.

“Wait. Not so fast youngster! That Tank boy has warrants, don’t he?”

Broderick sighed, quietly thinking, *Here we go again*, but gave no response.

“And that Neville boy, he has his own share of issues,” she said wondering to herself, *Is this boy trying to kill his mother, or what?*

“Ma, kill all that noise! Ya really need to go easy on my homeboys, they mean well!”

It had been many years since Detective Anjanae Bridges had put down the cancer sticks. She needed them now. Gravely, the thought of the resurrected vice was bittersweet, and her relapse worthwhile. She eyed the pack of Newport-menthol-100s with pure longing, salivating at the sweet nicotine aroma, conceiving the long, purposeful drags, the exhilaration in how the thick streams of smoke would full her lungs, savoring the Menthol residuals that would linger in her tastebuds, how the receptors in her brain would mobilize, the release of endorphins, the flow of “feel good” chemicals that would precipitate that enviable “runner’s high.” She could lose herself!

What’s more—the bonus—the quieting of disjointed thoughts rifling through her mind. One puff, could be that needed anesthetic for what was about to become—that nausea-inducing discussion she had put off having with her son.

Sitting at the breakfast table, hands wringing, knees knocking, lips quivering, Bridges flipped

through old photographs of her baby boy at different stages of his life. On the sly, she flashed quick, furtive glances in Broderick's direction, unknowing he had already peeped her once impenetrable resolve crumbling to pieces, and was no less dumbfounded about his whacked-out mother resorting to smokes.

She acquiesced. She would rather have proffered a kidney than drink of the bitter cup. But, time mattered as much as black lives, *did not* matter. She had never entirely let go of the notion that a young black man was killed by cops every 17 hours. Staring up at the clock, ticking off the seconds, she swore her son had exactly 15 hours, 20 minutes, 30 seconds before his turn came up again in the rotation. Each second wasted trying to forego giving it to him undistorted, was equated to cutting years from his life. She told herself she had to act fast if her son had any chances of avoiding "Operation Ghetto Storm," aka, another of the death squad's search and destroy mission, another episode of badged abusers potentially binging on her son's life!

In that instant of clarity, Bridges drifted off, her brown eyes flickering as a spur of some undetectable phenomenon flashed across those cocoa-brown irises. Outside her 2nd story window, four of Patterson, New Jersey's "finest" had three young, black men in their crosshairs; one with a cop's arm locked around his neck, the other two sprawled face down on the pavement, guns pointed to their heads.

"Goddamn bastards! Fuckin' worthless pieces of shit!" she seethed angrily. Then, "I'll be damned if you ever try that shit on my kid," she growled venomously.

Broderick asked, "Whatchoo over there cussing about?"

"Nuthin'," she snapped grasping it all in the aftermath, regretting she'd just transposed her ire onto her son.

Returning her focus to the street below, where the uniformed lynch monger's faces were flared and fuming, she could just about imagine their tacit and graphic vitriol, their rush to judgment,

already having pegged the young men as criminals, a group of uneducable, dull-witted, indolent, unaspiring thugs on a reign of terror.

A rare sense of urgency swooped in and emboldened the detective. She would have to pick up the pieces of a broken spirit, remind her son of things that should have been obvious. To let no one use their “white privilege” to define him, least of all, those select few blood-thirsty derelicts on Patterson’s militarized police force, indoctrinated by their racist assumptions.

Intermittently, she would have to give her own self a pep talk into believing she had not severely fucked-up her son’s parenting beyond recognition. Right about now, the only thing she was sure of was that her conflicting roles of a well-regarded undercover narcotics officer, and her occasional parental shortsightedness, did not make her a bad mother.

In fact, she prided herself in being well-versed about the particulars. She was not naive to the fact that her son did not have a white-sounding name like Connor or Garrett. What’s more, it was not lost on her that his lankiness made him a worthy contestant for their rash equating of the average young black man with big cats and apes, or humanoids with formidable strength and magical powers. She was aware that, to them, such crazed notions meant young black men could feel no pain, and thus it took more fire power to bring them down.

And too, there was no discounting the fact that she had intimidated the most “thirsty” gangster aspirant into running in the opposite direction, away from the vice grips of the most notorious gangs. Terrorized the most notorious drug lord into giving up the drug trade, turning their life over to God. But admittedly now, when it came to the more pressing matter of gaining her on child’s buy-in, she was a lost cause for how best to drive home the sense of urgency by way of, “the talk.”

Anjanae ambivalently flipped the new port back and forth through her fingers, thumped the filter end on the table, scooped it back up, aimed it at her lips, then snatched it away. Not wishing

to nosedive right into the matter, she finally began the discourse with, “I remember giving birth to you like it was yesterday, even if, it was almost nineteen years ago.”

Big, fat, salty tears, and that taste of unfathomable exhilaration, were already welling in the corners of the detective’s wide-set eyes, though she managed to contain them.

“And when they handed you to me, I saw the most beautiful sight in those puffy jaws and tiny fingers; those warm, baby-brown eyes, and that beautiful birthmark under your right eye, which set it all off. I knew then and there, my baby boy was a Godsend!”

From the opposite end of the table, Broderick looked on, absorbed in his mother’s trip down memory lane. Her recounting was so vivid, he seem to instantly reconnect with his infancy, almost to the point of traveling with her back in time. He could hear the sound of his first welching cry; feel the baby-smooth sensation of his bare skin up against hers; conjure up the unrestrained exhilaration bursting through his mother like painted finches, striped across clear blue skies.

At the risk of sounding too cheesy, Anjanae picked up a napkin, dabbed her wet eyes, and inserted a sharp-witted punchline through intermittent sniffles. “And oh, dare I forget, that cute, little cone head of yours.”

The wisecrack came with a satisfied smirk as she slid the photograph of him, fresh out of the womb, across the table.

“Oh, I see how it is,” Broderick retorted. “We’re going to go there again huh, Ms. Christy Love?”

That’s who his mom mostly reminded him of, the sassy, afro-flaunting, no-nonsense police detective from the 70’s crime show, *Get Christy Love*. The epitome of Ms. Love, his mother was the semblance of beauty, brains, a badge—and way too much tude!

“We ain’t even gonna talk about that prominent forehead of yours.”

Detective Bridges snickered then patted her bulging forehead, almost as if she was doing so

in affirmation. It was her only imperfection. Truth is, nearly everyone considered the petite, five foot four, cocoa-brown lily with an hourglass figure and a sensual mole just above her upper lip, to be a gracefully divine and beautiful woman.

Anjanae Bridges' eyes briefly held that twinkle of reminiscent pleasantries despite her son's quick-witted comeback. But what had not registered to Broderick before, was destined to come full circle now. The fresh trembling to her voice preceding that one pertinent addendum to her recollections.

"Knowing what I knew, I worried damn near every second of those nine months about bringing a black child into this world." With this last, Anjanae's features became rigid and strained, her gaze distant and resigned.

Hearing what he'd characterized as a hint of quiet regret, Broderick's own eyes narrowed to slits, his gaze hardened into granite, his mouth turned down into a paralyzing frown. The weight of Anjanae's nostalgic bemoaning, heavy and mournful, like a leaden fog, seemed to press down on him with a crushing force. The utterances like a dread-filled prophecy, gaining weight and gravity, the longer it hovered mid-air.

In response to the apparent second-guessing, Broderick asked, "Okay, so what's that supposed to mean mother?"

Then instantly, in that light-bulb moment, he began connecting the dots before she could even respond. At least, to the extent that he gleaned her lamenting was not out of regret, and her angst was suitably placed. Still, his intuitive mother reassured, hipping him to memories of another defining moment, his sparsely developed mind was too young to preserve.

"When you were two, you came down with Kawasaki Disease, which is supposed to be a rare condition but somehow it found its way into your little body. Spiking temperatures of 103 degrees, swollen glands, your tiny body, weak and drained."

At the mere recollection, Anjanae felt her heart give a twist in her chest and a sense of utter dread rolling thunderously through her stomach as she recalled Dr. Silas Kamal's urgent ultimatum.

"When Dr. Kamal said, he had to admit you into the hospital because your little heart might have been effected, I lost it! He urged that if they didn't act fast, you could lose your life."

Broderick listened in closely, reconciling the incredulousness of his probable death and its lack of impact on his infantile mind back then, compared to his mother's latest revelation.

"I thought I had done something wrong. Man I prayed like never before. I promised God, if he healed you, I would go to the end of the earth to protect you. Live better. Do right."

In that proudest, *I'm invincible voice*, Broderick reassured, "Nothing was ever gonna happen to me, ma."

She gave him that bolstering smile stroking his little ego before saying, "I know, you got this. Point is though, you don't ever have to be troubled about not being wanted. I'd give birth to you all over again, in a heartbeat. And, I'd give my life, ten times over, if it meant saving yours."

Truth be told, knowing what she knew now, she would have rather him lose his life to Kawasaki Disease. Better still, she would rather kill him herself—mercifully—like Sethe slaughtered her own baby, in that movie adaptation of Toni Morrison's masterpiece, *Beloved*. It would become her lesser of two evils in opposition of having him murdered by renegade, hatemongering cops who despised him simply because of his blackness. And though unpretty, Detective Anjanae Bridges knew, that is how deep her love ran.

Surveilling her expressions, Broderick realized in that moment of clarity what never should have been a doubt. The depths of their bond like a buttress of pillars buoying him, providing that piece of mind he was always the child she longed-for, reassuring him he had always been an inseparable extension of her, as vital and irreplaceable as the air they breathed.

It was also no longer a question where the sudden need for clearing the air was coming from.

Earlier that morning, he had told the detective he was meeting up with Neville Lloyd and Kevon “Tank” Willis in Cobbs Park. It was Lloyd’s idea that the three at least *try* to commemorate Independence Day. Even if they were faking their patriotism.

It hit him now, how the detective’s face had grown sullen, taking on a consternation that only a mother could know. Her reservations were about the life expectancy of her only son, who might get killed for *doing anything while being black*. Badly enough, Virginia and Otis Cobb Memorial Park was deemed a drug-infested, death trap. It also doubled as the one place in the hood where bad cops were likely to prey on young, black men.

Not known for subordinating her apprehensions, or for pigeon-holing her despairs, Anjanae abruptly switched gears. Rebounding quickly with that keen sense of purpose, she went full throttle into that no holds barred lecture, which came with a litany of demands.

“Let me see what you are wearing out this house today. You already know my pet peeves Broderick; no hoodies, sagging, piercings, or tattoos; not so much as a pocketknife, toenail clipper, or a fingernail file.”

“Really Ma? A hip-hop knees up?”

“I think it’s called a shakedown. And yes, if that’s how you want to look at it.”

He got up, walked to her end of the table, and stood, arms spread, feet wide, for the imaginary, stop and frisk.

“You don’t have to be so damn dramatic!” she hissed before literally giving him the once-over.

Aside from dreads that flowed down his dark-brown face like bangs, her son personified every bit of the decent, nice-looking, young man he had become. His baby face, smooth and lean, was accentuated with light brown eyes; his body fit and trim like a long-distance runner; and, that million-dollar smile, which managed to cap it all off. Settled that there were no red flags in her son’s sensibly

chosen apparel, or possessions, Anjanae's mind became leisurely distracted. She took distinct pleasure in the fact that her son had garnered most of her features, and hardly any of his dead-beat daddy's repulsive traits.

Back in the day, Anjanae had a thing with Lyle Evans she was desperate to keep on the DL. She would've died if her homegirls - or anybody else - ever got wind of it. Now, she couldn't for the life of her understand why she threw in with that scrappy East Jersey loser. Maybe it was just pity or maybe Evans' annoying persistence wore her down. Wasn't much to look at either; a lanky frame topped off with, a fugly, diamond-shaped face, and cracked, crooked teeth.

At 5'11, Evans wasn't tall, just an inch taller than his son. Funny how something as mundane as an unusually lopsided, poorly figured slouch could produce such a delightful child. But in the end, it was just another one of those quick and dirty affairs that sucked her dry and left her knocked up by a roughneck wannabe who was three years her junior. Anyways, that thing with Evans ended exactly how you'd expect: fast and messy. Broderick was the silver lining in an otherwise dark cloud, the only good thing to come out of that whole mess.

After she had finished giving him the once over, Broderick asked, sardonically, "Anything else Detective Christy Love?"

Seconds later, he was sorry he asked the question. He could damn near see the wheels turning in her cranium.

"As a matter of fact, there is, *Shugah!*"

Dismissing her haphazard Christy Love impersonation, he said, "What now?"

Impatience growing on his face like a flagrant force, he asked, "You about to read me my rights?"

"No smart-ass! I'm just trying to maximize your chances of making it out of a bad situation.

Alive!”

Detective Anjanae Bridges' voice reverberated with a chilling ferocity, eclipse only by the steely edge that framed each word. Harmoniously, her cocoa-brown eyes transitioned from molten heat to an icy chill. Though implicit, the stern message had been delivered. She would enter the fiery gates of hell if it meant saving his life. Standing there, rigidly still, Broderick felt an undercurrent of her conviction, knew that she was done playing games.

“Now, heaven forbid cops roll up on you, but if so, hands up, immediately. Don’t put them in your pockets to reach for nothing, without them telling you to. “Pointing her delicately small and unpolished index finger for emphasis, she added, “And for God’s sakes Broderick, don't make a lot of unnecessary movements, either. They get antsy about that shit too.”

Not discounting his protector’s good intentions, Broderick sighed, his face, scowling; angry thoughts rolling around his head. Under his breath, he brayed, “And they say Niggahs s’pose to be free.”

“And don’t give them backtalk. You know, like you’re doing now.”

“All I wanna know is, this what White people’s kids have to do to stay alive? Kiss-up to prejudice-ass cops?”

She gave him that icy glare, inconspicuously rebuking his cussing before saying, “Probably not, but I am not their mother, am I? And you are *not* white.”

“Thank goodness for small favors!”

“Boy listen to me!” By now she was practically bowed over the table; furrowed forehead, squinted eyes; one hand placed on her hips; the other pointing her fork at him like a primitive spear.

“Just when you began smelling your manhood, is when shit hits the fan. When you’re in their crosshairs, it is not the time for you to go fighting your personal battles.”

Inwardly, Detective Bridges hated giving ‘the talk’, just as much as her son loathed hearing it.

From her mouth to his ear, the strident forewarnings pierced his lobe like sharp needles. It was as if a chainsaw had been taken to his senses, slicing them apart with each erratic lunge. A cacophony of strident sounds: metal grating on metal, the meld of squeaking breaks, the wails of a banshee intermingled with screams of the dying, all pummeling him mercilessly until his mind was awash with unbearable noise.

For Broderick, the notion that kids his age and color had but two choices—cater to cops' outlandish, self-indulgent, superstitious, racial phobias, or die, came across like an atomic bomb at 200 decibels.

“Don’t see nobody talking to Five-O about how to deal with us. How to make *us* feel safe.”

“Yeah well, they’re the ones with the guns aren't they? With the authorization to use it; and can do so with the least bit of justification.”

“Right. Justification,” he said looking down at his brown-skinned body for emphasis.

Getting the hint, Anjanae backed off, then acquiesced.

“Look son, I know it's a disgrace to have to live like this, but like it or not, this is the hand that was dealt to us people of brown color and ebony hue.”

At that moment, their attentions were drawn to the fifty-five inch, high-definition TV mounted on the adjacent wall. The World News Network had started a series on the need for police reform; the first of which was focused on systemic racism.

“Turn that up,” Anjanae ordered.

Broderick sprang from the table, ambled over to the big screen TV, cranked up the volume until the news report filled the room.

The voice of an innocent, light-skinned boy, about eleven, timidly called out to his mother, “Mom, why would a cop automatically assume I did something wrong?”

Caught off guard, the shapely, full-figured woman’s brow knitted together. Mouth still

opened wide, she thrust her fingers through rows of thick, black, cropped hair that framed her round face. Flashing those long, dark lashes edging her chestnut-brown colored eyes, she appraised her son a few seconds more. At last, she sensed the gravity of his inquiry, wanted to school her son, but at the same time wanted to also seized the opportunity to encourage him to think for himself. Rather than responding with the answers he sought, she responded with a question of her own, “Why do you think?”

Tension filled the room like smoke. Painful truths lingered in the air. Then came the heartbreaking response. The boy finally uttered, “Maybe it’s because I’m black?”

The woman's tears burned trails on her cheeks. Joy and grief, wrestled inside her heart. Pride and sadness intermixed, she looked at her son - understanding too well the harsh reality he and she were facing.

Broderick gave Anjanae that vindicated, “I told you so” look. Mortified by the child’s innocence, his keen awareness, and her son's well-taken points, Detective Bridges said, “Fair enough. But I am not naïve to the fact that there are a few corrupt cops out there.”

“A *few*,” Broderick rebuffed. “You must not have seen the latest death toll mother. Seems it took more than a few cops to bring that about.”

“Maybe I’m just not ready to throw shade on all cops, because of what that might mean.”

“And what might it mean?”

“If there truly are no good cops, then the line between law and lawlessness is practically indistinct. And you know blacks get the worst of everything.”

“Hard to imagine much worse than black kids shot while playing with toy guns and young men beaten to within an inch of their lives.”

“Well *maybe* I just wanted my kid to have some shred of hope that there were actually good men and women in uniform who saw every kid as their own son or daughter. Whether or not I

believed that for myself.”

“Good cops don’t shoot innocent, unarmed people or try to make them hate themselves for being who they are mother.”

As an afterthought he said, “But hey, at least I know one good cop.”

“Yeah, and who might that be?”

Broderick flashed her that genuinely sweet, million-dollar smile then answered, “I’m looking at her, aren’t I? Even if she only represents, the two percent. And even if she is so easily duped.”

TWNN had ventured into part two of its police reform segment, this time focusing on the life and death of innocent, unarmed black men, shot and killed by corrupt and mentally deranged cops. Ahmad Amil, the light-skinned, seasoned journalist was in his newsroom at the other end of the city; former District attorney Keenan Bosco, Esq., was in his study at home. The interview was being held across video conference.

The commentary began with the shooting death of Kareem Marquis Tyson, in 2010, by a corrupt cop whom TWNN initially refused to name. According to the journalist, TWNN wanted its primary focus to be on the murder of innocent, unarmed young men of color, not the corrupt cops who slayed them.

Bosco was the district attorney at the time. Amil had asked, “Mr. Bosco, you found that the evidence in the shooting death of Tyson did not support an indictment, correct?”

The bearded, pudgy DA answered Amil curtly, “Actually, the grand jury decided that there was not sufficient enough evidence for an indictment.”

“Why was that exactly?”

“The policeman lawfully pursued the suspect out of probable cause.”

“What was the probable cause?”

“He fit the description of a person of interest in a drug trafficking charge and information was also obtained about his involvement in an assault with a deadly weapon incident.”

“Were there any warnings given?”

“Yes. The officer involved chased him for a couple of miles and ordered him to stop, and warned him he would shoot if he didn’t.”

“Is it lawful to shoot at an unarmed suspect simply because he runs?”

“In this state it is. Plus, when he turned around, stopped, tilted whatever he was carrying sideways, you know, like how gangsters hold their firearms.”

Stopping mid-argument, Bosco tried to illustrate the 'side grip' technique gangsters use when holding their weapons, but it was a fruitless effort. His attempt at imitating their movements lacked any semblance of gang conformity and his well-manicured hands were nowhere near the shape of a gun, or turned in its customary ninety-degree angle.

Seeing the utter look of incomprehension on Amil’s face, his inability to contain a faint chuckle, the former prosecutor finally recognized how un-gangster-like he must have appeared and gave up the flunking portrayal with an embarrassed sigh.

“Let’s just say, as far as the officer knew, he was armed.”

“Yes, but wasn’t it later determined that he was carrying a selfie-stick, not a weapon. And witnesses actually heard Tyson say, he was not carrying a gun?”

At the sound of what he conceived to be an out-and-out accusatory style of probing, the creases in Bosco’s puffy cheeks intensified, and his skin became flushed like a slab of raw meat, too long in the sun.

“Well I’ll tell you what, Mr. Ahmad Travelle Amill,” he sneered, emphasizing each syllable with contempt, “the cop thought it was a weapon!”

Testily, Bosco’s eyes darted back and forth between the reporter, and a faded photograph of

his late father, Keenan Bosco Senior, and Horace Bludgerton, a notorious prosecutor known for his extreme anti-black rhetoric and his power to manipulate cases that turned harsh sentences.

“And it was in his right to shoot if he believed his life was in jeopardy. And just so you know, Mr. Ahmad Travelle Amill, Patterson Police Department policy supports such decisions.”

Whether by accident or fluke, at the conclusion of the interview, a picture of Officer Max Judah Kane in one frame and sixteen year old Kareem Marquis Tyson in another, flashed across the screen. The caption under Tyson's photo read:

YOUNG, BLACK, INNOCENT, UNARMED, AND, MARKED FOR SLAUGHTER.

Chapter 4. An Informant Turns-Up

Detective Anjanae Bridges swore she needed an arch-nemesis to offset her squeaky-clean cop persona. Someone who could reaffirm she was not robotic, or bulletproof, or too white-bread on the inside. Ideally, a man's man, who could clear away the inhibitions of a torn sister always striving to be "blue" while endeavoring to be "black".

Hell, there were days, when she couldn't even bridge that gap with her own flesh and blood.

The earlier heart-to-heart with Broderick about street survival and cops' fear of the scary black man, had left her on one helluva guilt trip, disgusted with the latest bullshit she had just tried to sell.

She yelled in that sharp, indignant voice, "What the fuck was I thinking! Poor child probably think I'm a damn fool!"

Every inhaled breath she took to calm her frayed nerves, echoed with Irvin Senior's admonitions. "I swear sometimes you can be too damn gullible. You best be leery of those corrupt, black-hating sumbitches with badges, especially, those who believe they're above the law."

If there was one constant, it was her daddy's truths that occasionally cut her to the quick. A stark reminder of her own shortcomings, his brutal honesty served to stoke her anger forthwith. She swore if her father was still alive, he would disapprove of her perceived passivity, and rightly so. Conjointly, she couldn't help believing that his admonitions were on point, having little to do with generational gaps; rather, the ever-present anti-black sentiments, prevalent both then, and now.

She recalled Irvin Senior's unwavering voice from the night of a downtown city center gala, a year after her police academy graduation. The event had been a tribute to an injured, yet unscrupulous police officer who had taken down a so-called vicious youngster. All of the self-aggrandizing had seemed more than Irvin Senior could stomach.

"You'd do well to remember that those in power are no better than you. They succumb to their own flaws and incompetence, just like anyone else." Eyes widening, Bridges was suddenly

brought back to the present.

Irvin Senior's strokings aside, she berated herself harder, wishing she could make the well-deserved scolding sting a bit more. She was sure that pushing the idea that 'most cops are friendly' had nearly ruined her point in discussing 'the talk.' But it wasn't just that. The more she thought about it, the more she realized that it wasn't just a few careless remarks that had put her in this position, but a lifetime of subtle messages, insinuations, and assumptions that had been drilled into her from the moment she was born.

Their phrasings floated around her like a thick curtain of fog, obscuring her sense of self, even now; the babbling like a heavy blanket, smothering her into submission. The whispers, their judgement and expectations, drifting through like a low hum. She remember days standing in judgment, shoulders slumped, head bowed, listening to a litany of what she is not and should be—too loud, too opinionated, too high strung, too aggressive, too adorable, too petite, too short; how she'd do well to be quieter, less confrontational, less demanding, trowel on more makeup, dress more modestly, frown less, smile more. And dear God, up her church attendance and for God's sakes at least become more involved in her community.

She had internalized all of it. She had tried to be the perfect daughter, the perfect mother, the perfect sister, the perfect detective! Tried to please everyone around her, fit into their expectations, even when it meant sacrificing her own needs, her own desires, her own wants, her own dreams. But now, as she looked around at the world, those with such high expectations were nowhere to be found, and all she had to show for her unwavering compliance, was a surge of internal conflict washing over her. To add insult to injury, she couldn't shake the feeling that she had failed to make her son understand the gravity of the situation infamously termed, the talk.

But then too, she acquiesced that the talk, wasn't just about keeping Broderick Detrick Bridges alive. There was something potentially more. She couldn't help but surmise that her own fear

and anxiety had clouded her judgment. Maybe, just maybe, she was overreacting. But it never failed that such notions were infiltrated by countless newsflashes of yet another unarmed black kid mercilessly shot by white cops, or the footage of black bodies left sprawling in streets, their blood pooling in the cracks and crevices of sidewalks, clogging its drains. Worst more, she couldn't shake her mind's trickery of her son's face superimposed onto those corpses. Nor those times that such horrifying visions caused her knees to buckle, and brought her to tears night after night.

A weight so heavy on her shoulders, it felt she was carrying the burden of an entire community. Neither could she dismiss the commingling of consternation and that blood-curdling fury in her son's eyes each time they rode past a police car, a fear that was ingrained in the minds of young black men from a young age, a fear that was all too rattling. Confronted with such veracities of life, aware of her own inexperience, the detective subjected herself to one last round of self-induced vilification.

"Am I any ga'dang better than these law enforcement jerks who pile shit higher and deeper about 'honorable cops'. Right when a black community is already reeling about the scumbag who just killed another black kid."

This time, the sound waves of her voice spiraled out and echoed across the room as if it were swords clashing against shields in battle. Wearing a hole in the carpet between the living room, dining room, and kitchen, Bridges barely managed to keep her next onslaught of self-reprisals to a dull roar. Converging upon her was a full-throttled assault. "What's so fucking 'honorable' about cops who stand by, watch bad shit go down, and not do a damn thing?"

She had just tossed the last of the dishes into the dishwasher when the telephone rang. Trent Cole, her new informant, was on the line, a distraction that came not a moment too soon.

"Hello Queen. Just confirming our 1 PM meeting on Friday, the Fourth of July."

"Yeah, we're still on," she said dismissively.

Despite her good feeling about how their first meetup ended, she sounded preoccupied on the phone. Trent sensed something was up but also knew not to pry.

“My place still good?”

“Yes,” she said consenting to the rendezvous taking place outside Trent’s modest, studio apartment on E. 26th Street.

Bridges never envisioned her idea of an alter ego and her newly-assigned criminal informant, to be one and the same. Their first encounter was earlier in the week, on a stormy Tuesday. It was supposed to be a five-minute meet and greet, at Soul Crumbs Café down on Patterson’s East side, courtesy of her lieutenant, Roger Craft. After the introductions, Craft had vanished, leaving her and Trent to feel each other out. Aside from their rocky start, it was like her and Trent had known each other for an eternity, though it was only the first time they had met.

At first glance, Trent seemed destined to unblur the lines. Quite effectively, given his profile and colorful demeanor. She remembered thinking how he epitomized the son-of-a-gun her mother, Arleen Bridges, always warned her about; and, personified the hoodlum who would keep her late daddy, Irvin Senior, pacing the floor. All the same, Trent was a rehabilitated ex-con with a leash around his neck. The second he was to go off the grid, his newfound freedom would be deactivated. His sweet deal would be supplanted with the warm wave of stench blowing over the musky bodies of prison inmates.

They sat across from each other in a red and white checkered booth, briefly staring each other down. Though she could never say so, her criminal informant was, for sure, easy on the eyes. Prison had not sullied him; perhaps it had torn him down and rebuilt him into a tall, lean, ripped, chocolate-brown specimen who embodied the finely carved features of African gods.

Her mind was already forewarning her, *This could become complicated*. An ex-felon was not

supposed to resurface in the form of a handsome baldheaded black man with earth-brown eyes, pencil-thin beard, and those thick, inviting lips. Perhaps he'd do something to turn himself into an ugly beast. A divergence for which she desperately hoped. She fiercely opposed. She needfully implored. She fervently rejected. Hell, she was just too damn at odds with herself.

All seemed well up until that moment Trent opened his big, fat mouth. There was no, "Hello," or "Hi, how are you doing?" or simply, "My name is Trent Cole."

Right off the bat, he graced her presence with that husky voice. "First things first, Detective Anjanae Janean Bridges. If this new relationship's gonna work, a brother is gonna have to lay down some ground rules."

Having taken this last as colorful, flagrant insinuations with sexual overtones, Anjanae skeptically wondered *what the fuck*, through squinted eyes.

"Relationship? Lay down?"

Trent nodded in the affirmative, unsure of why she was confused.

"I'm not really sure about your meaning of relationship and whatever else you might've had in mind, but I prefer to keep things strictly by the book Mr. Cole."

Leaning into within an inch of her face, Trent murmured in a condescending tone, "Well, I, prefer to give it to you, straight up, no chaser." This last came while licking his lips and looking her up and down, from lips to her breast to her thighs. Then came that lustful smirk from lips curved with amusement.

"Excuse Me! What the fuck did you just say to me?" She said, slamming her fists to the table; glaring at him as if she wanted to smack the living shit out of him. Instead, she rummaged through her purse and tossed a crisp, one-hundred-dollar bill at him.

"Here you go motherfucka! Take your hard-up ass, down on Hooker Boulevard (Tonnelle Ave) and buy yourself some snatch from one of them lot lizards. Don't bring your ass back until you

can talk respectfully, and with some good sense!”

Wide-eyed, Trent watched the goosebumps forming on the detective's brown skin leaving inflamed elevations like those formed upon wild turkeys whose prickly feathers had just been plucked.

“Don’t you ever confuse me with one of these loose-booty, ghetto-fabulous hoes, out here!”

She was about to get up to leave when Trent extended his strapping arms horizontally, palms down. He waved them downwards, several times, to deescalate the angry black Sapphire.

In a slow, dragging voice he said, “Now, caaaalm yourself, Ms. AJB. You know very well that is not what I meant or even had in mind. Just meant, I believe in keeping it real. “Anjanae’s face stiffened into a gray obstinacy then fell abruptly into stern lines. Seeing the uninvited attention she had drawn; the raw reactions of wide-eyed patrons around them; replaying Trent’s passionate denials, she wondered if she hadn’t overreacted.

In time, she doubtingly bought into Trent’s elucidation, though there was still the matter of a newly sprung parolee trying to call the shots. Bridges was about to light into him again for that transgression too but lost her nerves. Suddenly, something was abruptly askance. Trent’s eyes were fixated upon her as if staring into the windows of her soul. His boisterous veneer had vanished, and her honorability restored. Trent’s lips morphed into something other than that sly, shit-eating grin he had mastered. The earlier smirk washing across his face was gone. In its place, was a conciliatory smile that put her more at ease.

“Alright, you may speak your piece. But I warn you, proceed cautiously parolee!”

“All I was really tryin’ to say, and I know I fucked it all up, but you’re one fine-ass Sista. And yes, I ain’t gonna deny it. Rest assured Detective Anjanae Bridges, if I had my way, I could make beautiful memories with you as my queen.”

Detective Bridges drew in a deep breath, held it long, then shook her head seemingly in

rejection, seemingly in faint submission to the innuendos. But, strikingly enough, that possibility did not seem so farfetched. Rather than, “I don’t fraternize with wet behind-the-ear parolees,” or “What can a thirty-eight year old ex-convict do for me,” she pivoted with, “You don’t say. Well, I wouldn’t hedge my bet on that happening, least not anytime soon.”

Trent saw the window of opportunity she subtly left open and said, “Oh, I do say. Better yet, that’s how I’ll refer to you, from now go on. Queen!”

Though she had tried her damndest to fight back the blushing, Trent had already appealed to her, as in, his Mack-daddy charm riding roughshod over her better judgement. That initial, *brief* meeting, spanned five hours, lasting well into the afternoon.

Detective Bridges had not expected to reconvene with her CI until three days later. But a mandatory, impromptu meeting on the eve of July 4th (Thursday), had been ordered by Lieutenant Craft. The two were summoned to meet ASAP at Precinct Four; something having to do with dope deals and sting operations.

After a two-hour long grilling, Trent had sweet-talked the detective onto the terrace. Bridges gathered his intentions were to fortify his romanticizing. But by the time they arrived, Trent seemed distant; unusually out of sorts, and not his usual high-spirited self.

Trent stood off to one side of the balcony, taking in the ambiances he thought he had missed his last ten years in lockup. Disappointedly, the informant soon figured not much had changed about the inner city, except that ten years’ worth of wear and tear, had taken its toll. He zoomed in on several buildings with its paint peeled and flaking, a few railings unsecured by bolts, stairwells up against high-rise apartments left to swing.

Otherwise, it was simply hustle and bustle, just as he had left it—everything in their exact same patterns; a few shabby bails bondmen huts added; a few recreational facilities taken away; a

few causeways re-routed. At that height, the wind carried putrid smells of the city, varying from car fumes, to garbage, to construction worker's pheromones, fused with the stench of car exhaust and diesel fuel, tar and flame retardants, and the aroma of bleach and soapsuds from window-washings.

The silent treatment having become too unnerving, Bridges finally asked, "So what's your story, Mr. Trent Cole? Why a life of crime?"

Trent's face came to life, his lips twitching into a brief smirk before he answered her; like her voice was the melody his soul needed to function.

"Well first off Queen," He drawled out, with a faint tinge of graveness in his tone, "I didn't choose this life. It chose me."

"What do you mean, chose you?" She challenged, her expression hardening as she leaned forward slightly, crossing her arms in anticipation.

Trent's jaw muscles clenched in frustration at a fine, black sister's inability to relate. "I mean," he shrugged nonchalantly, "when that low-down, no good pops of mine took off, I didn't have a lotta choices."

"Everyone has choices, Mr. Cole," Bridges stated firmly. "And as you well know, those choices have consequences."

"Truedat, Truedat," he acquiesced with a nod and a wave of his hand before adding slyly, "but I also had his genes."

"Genes? Okay look, why don't you just cut the bullshit man!" Anjanae barked angrily as she slammed her hands onto her hips and glared daggers at him. "Just who do you take —"

Cole's hand shot up, cutting her off flat, as though he'd preconceived, she was about to hit him up with more of the same regurgitated crap she'd just spewed; much more than he could stomach.

"Trust me Queen, it ain't so easy when a .357 magnum is at your head, demanding your fidelity."

Bridges was already fixing her mouth to respond with forbearance when Cole raised a hand again, alerting her that he had more to say. “Try to cut and run and see don’t you find yourself feeling the beat of the tambourine (death).”

At a loss for words, Detective Bridges conceded, partially convinced that the ‘poor excuse for a father’ and ‘deadly reprisal’ pretexts had some merit.

“Ok, let’s say, for the time being, I get your drift Trent. You still have zero chances to mess up.”

“Ain’t messin’ up. Not missin’ out on the goods. I meant to say, not missin’ out on a good woman.”

There went, another foot in the mouth, another need for cleaning things up. But too, she knew damn well what he meant. Just as she knew his blatant expressions were reflective of her own subconscious desires. Her detection of the Freudian slip came with a nearly immobilizing scare. She could no longer deny that deep down inside, she wanted those wanton overtures to mean exactly what Cole intended.

Gripped with another dose of reality, Anjanae sensed a connection in ways she was not sure either of them understood. He was magnetic, yes, but also dangerous. And it wasn't just the physical attraction either - although undeniably, he was easy on the eyes; that chiseled jawline, his intense gaze.

It was something more primal than that, her thrillseeking cravings, amassed with a shocking revelation that it had always been there, lying dormant. Maybe even since she started working undercover as a narcotics detective years ago. Adrenaline rushing through her veins as she foiled drug transactions and dodged bullets in pursuit of kilos of dope. This new riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma had likewise descended upon her, offering twisted pleasures if only she would let go her inhibitions and succumb to temptation.

As though perceiving the same practicalities - the peculiarity of their pairing, he a rough and untamed parolee, she a seemingly blemished soul - Cole snapped completely out of his funk and began pushing the envelope. His roving eyes started at her breasts, strolled down her thin waist, and ended at her supermodel thighs. The glare of his eyes was so powerfully potent, it could disintegrate her leopard-patterned scarf and penetrate her red velvet dress. She felt hot flashes and her girl parts doing their thing down below!

At last, she intervened to counteract the internal excitement wreaking havoc in her loins. "My eyes are up here," she said refocusing him.

"Say what? Come again? Okay, I'm busted, my bad."

"Since you like it, '*straight up, no chaser*,'" she said winking, "here are my terms. As you know, your informant agreement requires you to abandon your old life for good."

She eyed Cole sternly and warned that if she got one whiff he was back to his old ways, she was out, as in, Skip Tracy. To fortify the vow, she dragged a finger across her neck, and threatened, "And after eighty-sixing your behind, I'll be the one slapping cuffs on you and dragging your black-ass downtown myself."

Cole shook his head, in attempt to put her mind at ease. Raising his hands in submission, he insisted, "Ain't messin' up Queen. Ain't goin' back...No ma'am! Now, you can believe whatchoo want, but I put that on my mama's grave!"

"Uh huh," she replied distrustfully, shaking her head side-to-side before adding, "Yeah, we'll see."

Anjanae's heart and mind were two forces waging war against each other. Mind said, 'We're such an unlikely pair, him and me.' Heart said, 'But Anjanae, this could work.' It was not Cole's quick comebacks as much as those damned tattoos undulating across muscles, which illustrated his storied life and gave Bridges all the reasons she needed. A mural of a dead mama on his shoulders;

a clock without hands on his neck; the preying hands of Jesus rippling across his chest. Almost certainly, it was a long, faint, jagged-edge wishbone scar alongside his face that sealed the deal.

As an afterthought, Anjanae finally warned, “Oh, and if I ever was to foolishly consent to this little whatchamacallit you are proposing, it would have to be kept on the DL.”

With this announcement, the left side of her face, red lipstick and all, heaved upwards into a teasing smile. By all means, it was a conflict of interest, her getting cozy with the help. And no less, an informant whose parole agreement came with contingencies. His spilling the beans about covert drug deals in exchange for continuing to breathe clean, fresh air. Too good to pass on, Cole had morphed into many things: her one and only vice; a potential love interest; her sounding board; and, the medium between her and her Black people.

Her guarded receptiveness took Cole by surprise; shock registered on his face and more seconds went by before he was able to compute, find words. Cole allowed himself a moment of reverie about the partially consenting hot number before him. Hers was the type of daunting beauty that would render a man speechless; make him second guess why he even thought he qualified.

Relegating the feisty detective as pretty or sexy was too insulting. She was all that and then some. The petite, curvaceous winsome with sassy black hair, rosebud lips, hypnotizing smile, and a tantalizing scent, was simply off the charts.

Chapter 5. Hushed Signals

Anjanae was scratching her head for any explanation about why the unrelatable piece of information her informant, Trent Cole, was itching to divulge, apparently could not wait until their talk later in the day. He had aroused her from a sound sleep, at around 1:30 AM, demanding she come downstairs to hear him out.

When she stepped to him in the faintly-lit parking lot, leaning back against his ride, Cole's eyes bore an unusual, eerie certainty. But, being the quintessential Cole, he got right down to business; no Salud, thank you, or mea culpa for dismantling her sleep. Just that thick, gravelly voice through which he reaffirmed the obvious.

"Now, I am hip to what all this new role requires Queen. As I see it, my stool-pigeon duties require me dropping dimes on these street hustlers, gunrunners, drug kingpins, and cartels."

Listlessly yawning, Anjanae answered agreeably in that deep throaty groan, "Yeah, stick to that and you'll be just fine."

Cole sensed she would say just about any damn thing if it meant catching a few more hours' worth of shut-eye. But notwithstanding her initial disinterest, Anjanae eventually noticed a peculiar gravitas in Cole's expression that would not surrender; a gravity that briskly awakened the detective like a cold splash of water to the face. What ensued, was the emergence of a peculiarly strange aura cautioning her to be still, hear him out.

It was as if her hands were being tightly clasped and she was being drugged along through Cole's ensuing shadows of death and his valleys of despair; made to picture things as they were, as 'patently real' as John Coffey had brought to the fore, the blood and carnage of those young girl's gruesome deaths in that riveting scene in *The Green Mile*.

Bridges yanked at the straps of her lavender robe until they were taut around her frame. The form-fitting black pajamas underneath disappeared as if into a void. She folded her arms around her

chest firmly, as if preparing to become the wrong-headed target of an incoming barrage of proclamations that would come raining down like verbal bullets.

“Our black brothers and sisters are being killed and left for dead in the streets by these racist muthafuckas hiding behind their badges. Our people are dying Queen, and they don’t wanna do nothin’ to stop it; they just wanna study it like it’s some damn, tricky math problem.”

Bridges bobbed and weaved her head appreciably. She wanted to say, “I am not a cop with blinders on,” but held back.

“Shit! They droppin’ our asses right out of the womb, straight into the tomb Queen.”

Cole bitched, moaned, and groaned about how back in the day, Black people’s only worries were about being broke; welfare workers snooping around, mercilessly crunching every red penny that’d push recipients over the poverty line; the lost cause of making ends meet, screaming phone calls from bill collectors so far up their asses, they could see the pink.

“Today, we worried about living to see the next second. Lookin’ over our shoulders, making sure these fools don’t get the drop on us.”

Intuiting this as another of Coles’ need to air out his frustrations, the detective stood there with a pacifying stare and gave the CI his day in court.

“And this unspoken bullshit about if we want the killing to stop, we have to help these psychotic killing machines to understand their own fucked up minds; help them understand why they keep killing us. Now you tell me if that ain’t some bullshit.”

“I don’t dare disagree with anything you have said Trent. But I just know that if I get too caught up in the madness; too depressed about the injustices, I would be a hot ghetto mess, ineffective at doing what little good I can.”

“Trust me Queen, my beef ain’t with you. I know you feel the pain and I know you have to keep it one hundred.”

There was desolation in Trent's voice when he veered slightly and began reminding the detective about the length of his ten-year bid.

“Might not seem like it but that’s a long time in the joint Queen. But on the fo’real though, it helped. Gave me time to piece things together. Get a hold on the origin of all this madness. I sat, read, thought and rationalized; read some more, till my eyes were about to pop out.”

She said a little sardonically, borderline mockingly, and with a cautious smirk, “So then tell me Mr. el-Hajj Malik el-Shabazz aka Malcom X, aka reformed prison book scholar, did cracking the books, all that boning up, change your perspective on things?”

“Hmmp. Perspective? Couldn’t find a damn thing about what we did so wrong to stoke their so-called fears or deserve this hell they’ve created for us.”

“Well, maybe you haven’t heard all the rhetoric about critical race theories and all the premature stoked up fears about things that haven’t even transpired. Anyway, I’m not all that surprised. Some things are just meant to keep people in the dark Trent. People up to no good don’t usually tip their hands; or, put their true rationalities or intentions in books.”

Though he mildly conceded, Cole stared at her, unresponsive, jaws clamped together; while whatever was going on inside of him festered.

“Or maybe,” he said matter-of-factly, “it’s all a bunch of made-up bullshit!”

“Exactly,” Anjanae partially agreed, not wanting dispute nor desiring to stoke the flames of an already combustible human torch.

Without any real segue, Cole rapidly switched gears on her; his voice taking on a deadlier tone. The pitch and timbre came across like a lethal injection of the most savage warnings: *beware of wolf in sheep's clothing and someone about to be thrown to the lions.*

“Real talk Queen! I also see my role as making sure you ain’t about to run up on something that’d get you smoked by one of these fools out here.”

In defiance of the seriousness lurking in the depths of her informant's eyes, Bridges postured and then affirmed, "I knew what I was up against when I signed up Trent. Risks come with the territory."

"Just making sure you're watching your back out here. I'm not just talking about with these dope dealers and gangster wannabes neither."

"Like I said Trent, I was aware of what I was getting myself into when I signed on. And you don't hafta remind me to look both ways before stepping off the curb into a busy street."

With a rarefied touch of anger, Trent said, "For real Queen? You know damn well, this ain't about crossing no damn street! Real talk, I think you need to just hear a brother out."

Sighing she said, "Okay Trent, you have my ears."

"True enough, these dudes you meeting in a week are bad news. The one cat, Zackariah James, is the most ruthless motherfucka of them all. He the type, that if he smells a rat, will walk straight up on you, put a revolver to your head, and splatter your brains on the sidewalk, just that plain and simple."

"I've read the intel Trent. But what's up with all the fearmongering? Just tell me why am I outside my condo, at 1:30 AM, with an amped-up informant, jacking my jaws."

"Because Queen! What if I told you, cats like Zackeriah James ain't your worst enemy. For all you know, on any given day you could be walking straight into an ambush, setup by your Boys-in-Blue."

"Last I checked, I hadn't pissed anyone off. Hadn't made it onto anyone's shit list either. So, I think I'm good."

"But you *are*, a black woman, in plain clothes, carrying a concealed weapon, not wearing a badge. That right there is a death warrant waiting to be signed."

"Once again, where's all this coming from? Who got beef? You heard talk? Just spit it out

Trent!”

“I just know friendly fire ain't always, *friendly*. And I’m never cool with putting a black, undercover female cop at risk, knowing how dangerous it is for her outside.”

“As you've noted, I’m an undercover narcotics officer Trent. I must blend in.”

“What I do know Queen, is that when you are a black uniform cop, at least you're part of the gang; when you're out of uniform baby, out here, you are fair game.”

Trent volunteered details of a cop shooting from a month ago; a combination of drug dealer revenge and friendly fire. It was a rather candid overview, his walking Bridges through the scenes like an old trusty seeing-eye dog guiding its master through a typical day.

“I know you heard the lowdown about Detective Lakenya Blunt’s death, right?”

“Yeah, bits and pieces, but by all means, feel free to fill in the blanks.”

“It was a drug buy gone really bad. Detective Blunt, the lead undercover detective, had gotten close and personal with the drug dealer Udonavon “Candyman” Long, to where he had come to trust her.”

According to Trent, Blunt had set up the buy wherein her partner, Detective Gino Auer, posed as the buyer. The early morning deal (set up for 8 AM) was about to go down on Godwin Avenue between Carroll and Summer streets, one of the notorious spots for drug trafficking.

“Their cars were parked facing opposite directions, like those over there.”

Trent pointed at three Prospect Park Police Department patrol cars, a few feet away, under a flickering lamp pole; high beams on, engine running at full speed. Each unit was outfitted with a uniformed cop sitting at the wheel; their lips were moving but in slow-mo. One cop had pantomimed zipping his lips and throwing away the key; while the other knowingly smirked and gave his fellow patrolman the unwavering look of *esprit de corps*.

Anjanae twisted her neck to see her peers who seemed only half-aware of the world outside their squad cars. With a deep breath, she nodded at Trent to continue.

“So, Detective Blunt was parked on one side; Long and his two stooges in the middle; and Detective Auer, on the other side. All in unmarked POVs.”

Trent came alive in his usual animated form though his wry smile seemed incompatible with his ensuing announcement.

“Out of the blue, Gino whispers something into Long’s window and then, all hell broke loose. The next thing you hear is, ‘Yo man, this bitch is Five-O!’

Everyone bursts out of their vehicles, bullets start to fly, even from the other six cops who had been trailing them in unmarked vehicles the whole time.”

Trent told Bridges that the entire time, the bullets were all flying in one direction; right at Detective Lakenya Blunt; ten shots, one kill.

“Even though her fellow detectives were shooting at her too, no talk of friendly fire or foul play ever came up. They pinned it all on the “Candyman” even though Blunt’s body was littered with bullet fragments from Detective Gino Auer firearm and the other six cops’ guns too.”

Trent alerted the detective to the news report that came out later that evening.

A Paterson, New Jersey narcotics officer was killed in the line of duty this morning during a high-risk sting operation. According to a PNPD spokesperson, Detective Lakenya Blunt was survived by her twin sister, elder brother, frail mother, and her sole-surviving son.

Anjanae stared pathetically at her CI as if the cryptic message he had delivered was a cheap, thoughtless, perfunctory gift that no one ever asked for.

“Thanks for that intel Mr. Cole. But I really should be getting back to bed, especially if our meeting later today is going to be productive.”

“*Mr. Cole?* Are you fuckin’ serious right now?”

“Yeah, I am,” she said coldly.

“So, you didn't hear a damn thing I just said.”

“Heard you loud and clear Trent. Believe me, my heart does grieve for Detective Lakenya Blunt; and, I now have even more reasons to despise rotten police tactics. But, what more do you want me to say?”

“I guess, nothin'.” Trent said, depleted.

The missing link Trent was not privy to was that shortly after entering the force, Anjanae had begun having these inclinations of how her life's ending would evolve. While she was not arrogant enough to believe she was bulletproof or would dare dismiss the volatile nature of her chosen profession, the detective did not foresee her death coming with bullets attached.

By sheer chance, she would slip and crack her skull; be clobbered by a rare disease, or be forced off the road into a steep ravine with pit vipers and gators ripping her to shreds. Or maybe, she would just die of old age. Whichever way or hour, death was to come calling, she was living in the here and now, and saw little reason why her life should be incapacitated by the suspense of inevitable death.

Chapter 6. Picnicking While Black

Friday, July fourth, 2014, 12:00 PM

The sky above Otis Cobb Memorial Park was a sweltering yellow, unrelenting in its glare. Pounding sunrays stabbed into park patrons' eyes, making it hard to look directly into the beam, but neither was it easy to look away. A too hot to touch weather, an invisible eavestrough of calamity, barely a breeze.

The horizon faded away into a shimmering white, filled with the mirages of smokestacks and factories off in the distance. Below, at street level, a different kind of energy vibrated through the park—the vibes of impossibility. The only sounds: a train in the distance; an untuned church bell elsewhere; something resembling a pistol cracking in a different place. Infused with it, was the acrid smell of the city, the blended scent of industrial chemicals, burnt rubber, and asphalt baking in the heat; exhausts from trolley cars, factory fumes, sweat and musk, all blended together into an overwhelming scent.

Stray cats darted around the park looking for scraps of food; famished flies and ants likewise in a feeding frenzy at the slightest hint of a morsel, all whilst hyperactive squirrels scampered along branches collecting whatever they could in their furry paws.

Broderick, Tank, and Neville all exchanged knowing glances, their faces illuminated in unison, by a yellow sky swooping down. An unspoken consensus between them – who was next? The question hung in the air like a hot summer breeze, permeating the park, the setting for this 4th of July ritual that echoed with significance.

Broderick watched bowed heads and depleted looks of fathers slaving over smoke-filled grills; going through the motions in vain. The aroma of all the fixings wrapped in foil seemed like an irreconcilable charade. Tank was zoning in too, recognizably aware that celebrating Independence Day, was like commemorating in ignorance.

Indistinguishable from dominos falling worldwide; suchlike coke bottles on hitching posts waiting to be blasted, their brothers in the struggle were being picked off. One-by-one! A week ago, it was the youngster in Ferguson pleading, “Hands up, don’t shoot!” Before that, the dude in Pittsburg, allegedly an accessory in a drive-by shooting. And before that, the cat in Walmart fooling around with a toy gun.

Tank asked, “I know y’all heard about that dude in California, right?”

Placing a hand on Neville’s shoulder, he clarified, “The one they shot in the back for supposedly jacking cars.”

Twisting his wiry body to face him, Neville sneered disdainfully at Tank’s dirty nail beds and hissed even more at his friend’s poor choice in apparel.

Neville pushed Tank’s hands away, spoke in that almost feminine tone, always referring to himself in the third person. “Neville will do you one better,” he said confidently.

Broderick exclaimed, light-heartedly, “Then speak on it my son. Preach!”

“How about that kid in Pittsburg. They capped his ass without a second thought, just for running away from a traffic stop.”

Shaking his head, Neville continued, “He wasn’t even the driver. Ain’t had nothing in his hands, not even a cellular phone.”

Appraising his manicured, sheenly polished nails, Neville added, “To hear them tell it, he was running away from Five-O and that made him a safety risk to the public.”

Snapping his teeth, Tank spat, “Safety risk my ass. Cops ain’t shit man. Ain’t nothin’ but a bunch of conniving, heartless motherfuckas. Always up to no good, always hounding niggahs! Like they own our asses! But they ain’t runnin’ shit right here. Feel me?”

“Don’t you DARE say that shit like you mean all cops,” Broderick chastised, his face creased with disgust. “Because you know damn well my mama is a straight up legit cop!”

Swirling a saturated toothpick between his lips Tank said, “Aiight! Sure thing homie. Maybe all cops, except your badass Mama, Broderick. She, can be the exception.”

“*Maybe?* The fuck you mean maybe? Ain’t no maybe about it dumbass! First off, my mama is more than some damn exception. Practically set the standards for police conduct.”

Disinterested, Tank rolled his eyes and snapped his teeth. Enraged by the diss, Bridges belabored the point in a predator-like mode. “To top it off fool, that woman prays every day for peace and harmony, something your lowlife ass wouldn’t know about.”

Oblivious to the possibility that his poorly chosen words had struck a nerve, Tank mean-mugged Broderick, wondering why his roll dog - who right now was more of a frenemy - was hauling him across the coals. Not only that, but he also asked himself why his easily-offended homie could not fathom how such extreme attempts to revere his *superlative* mom-detective, might be reopening old wounds.

Tank’s mother, Bonita Willis was dead! Though residual, Tank's emotional scars still smarted like a phantom limb. His homies' lording over his living, breathing mother—like she was God's gift to the green earth—proved an ill-prescribed salve for a yet-aching wound. But animus aside, Tank managed to keep things moving.

“But real talk, you know that kid, the one they capped in Pittsburgh, he worked as a community volunteer. Plus, he was on the honor roll Broderick.”

Fixing his eyes on Broderick’s face, he added, “Word is, he was even in the gifted and talented program taking college classes.”

Tank shifted his focus to Neville and announced, “And he had no criminal record prior to his death either. That’s real-talk Neville!”

Drawing his lower lip between his teeth, he disclosed, “And peep this Broderick. His mother worked for another police department, as a cop too. She was also on the up-and-up, like how you

said about your mama.”

Acknowledging his dawg's lukewarm attempt at appeasement, Broderick nodded haphazardly. As an afterthought, he inwardly conceded that Tank's hit-or-miss attempt did at least trigger reflections about his mother's overly optimistic, do-gooder attitude. More so, how Detective Anjanae Bridges always pushed the narrative about 'good cop' outweighing 'bad cop' and pounded preemptory warnings into his head, like she had done earlier that morning.

But more than that, Tank's perfunctory words had elicited memories of he and Anjanae's exchange just as he was about to dash out the door. Right when he had turned the doorknob, Anjanae lightly touched his forearm; gave him that eerie, knowing, unnerving look; that look of discernment, like it might be the last time either of them would see the other in lifeform.

Staring intently through those baby brown eyes of his she had said, 'Your mom's a cop. In my line of work, things can go bad, quickly. So, you want every exchange with your baby boy to come from a good place, leaving no room for regret or second-guessing.'

Broderick remembered fixing his mom with that weighty, unsettled look. The kind that conveyed more questions were left to be answered. Sensing she had already said too much, the detective's only response was that proud, adoring, squinted eye stare down before switching gears with more inspiring words.

'You're a good kid Broderick, whom I'm willing to bet my life is gonna make me proud one day, whether or not I'm here to see it. You been keeping your nose clean and staying out of trouble.'

Upon seeing her son's expression spiraling further downward into an abyss, Detective Anjanae Bridges, with an abrupt singsong lilt, had burst into a lyrical voice, her words playfully rising and falling with jazzy cadence as she spun anecdotes of her reverent black son.

'There was a young black man who's so very smart, do do, de do do...Been already five times on the honor roll, from the very start, da dah' da dah' da dah' da dah'. Got Howard University

practically beating doors down, to get him in, shooby doo, doop doo, doop doo!’ Reaching her crescendo, Anjanae had clapped her hands to her own beat, then pause for that dramatic effect before belting out the last few lines, ‘Look at my black child, so very intellectual, da dah' da dah' da dah' da dah'! That mean he something sooo very special...Da dah' da dah' dah' dah' da dah'!’

Then, she’d cap it all off with that goofy, V-for-Victory sign she made with her index and middle fingers. Which, she never quite got right. All the same, it forced that blushing smile right out of him. They were in a 'good' place. He glanced to Tank and Neville, his expression solemn. “Before pinning on that shield,” he said, his voice a low whisper, “she always stills her breath and gazes up at the ceiling in silent prayer.”

Having had all he could take of his homeboy lavishing praises after praises upon his 'awe-inspiring' mother, a quick flame leapt back into Tank’s bloodshot eyes, they flickered back and forth, a precursory warning to an ensuing all-out internal power failure. Unfazed by a roughneck all up in his feelings, Broderick continued his worshiping spiel.

“I hear her in there praying nights before bed. All she ever asks for is that the Almighty allow her to do the right thing and make a difference in the world.”

Pray! Peace! Almighty! These were hard-hitting, trigger words. *Easy for him to say*, Tank thought. Where were those solemn prayers; that everlasting peace; the Almighty, or those ‘honorable cops’ when he needed it most. A few years back, Tank had come home one night to a dead mother. All ninety-eight pounds of Bonita Willis was slumped into a chair; a partially empty syringe with less than a milligram of Smack still piercing her coal-black skin. Jolted from these bad memories, Tank lit into his homeboy again, this time not sparing him his incendiary rage.

“Damn! We got it Broderick! Your mom is better than most. She good! She perfect! She prays! She hooks up with the Almighty! Niggah, give it a fuckin' rest!”

Neville abruptly straightened his stance, hands on his hips like he was the sassiest male model

on the runway, all confident and dogmatic like. Though his body language had thoroughly communicated his take on the matter, he turned to Tank with a raised eyebrow and pursed lips, and said, "Neville thinks, someone's having a bad day!"

"Shut the fuck up Neville! No one asked yo' punk-ass nothin'!"

Neville's eyebrow shot up in disbelief with an exaggerated eye roll. He slowly wiped his face with a flourish of dignity, before shooting back scathing remarks that hung in the air. "Oh no you didn't! Lemme tell yo' bitch-ass somethin' sweet pea, you don't know nothin' about nothin! Tryna act all gangsta when Neville knows you ain't even got half the skill of a back alley rat!"

He paused for a beat to let his words sink in before firing out another flurry of sassy retorts that seemed to zing through the atmosphere. "Look, Neville don't know what done crawled up yo' ass but you really need to check that attitude! Find your happy place niggah. Cuz you already know little boy, Neville ain't the one to be fucked with!"

"Say what Niggah?" Tank shot back, as angry momentum propelled him forward, inch-by-inch, toward his scrawny, loudmouth friend. Unflinching, Neville stood his ground.

Sensing the ensuing melee, and betting a brutal aftermath would disfavor Neville, Broderick raised a mediating hand in an attempt to deescalate the feud.

"Okay, aiight, I'm good. So why don't you motherfuckas just chill!"

Both the brash loudmouth and savage beast abided dispersed to their neutral corners; still fuming but nonetheless cooled ten degrees.

"All I'm saying," Tank said rolling his eyes at Neville, "is every cop ain't your mom, and your mom ain't every cop Broderick!"

"I know that," Broderick answered, his tone as depleted as the sobering look on his face. Something serious and eminently human lurked in the depths of his eyes.

Seconds later, Tank felt guilty about his unbridled outbursts upon seeing the wounded,

affronted look on his partner-in-crime. Contrastingly, Broderick had acquiesced. His friend had him dead to rights on those salient points. Indeed, his preoccupation with Detective Anjanae Bridges' good deeds and saintly ways had blinded him to another's pain and suffering.

Truer still, even if his mom topped the list of a rare breed of cops who could be classified honorable; and even if she represented all that was good and right in the world, where did it get her; where had it gotten the black race. The death toll of Black people was still mounting. There was little room for bragging rights or for that matter, victory dances.

Stealing themselves from the dreadful obsessions of corrupt cops; the hypocrisy of Independence Day and, everything else in between, the three milled around the park bench like three co-conspirators on one accord, with pegs too deep to uproot. Without warning or manual intervention, Tank's boombox blared like a randomly triggered car alarm. Tupac's national anthem, "How Do You want-it," penetrated the air.

Startled, Broderick and Neville flinched instinctively and took a step back. Tank looked strangely at Neville as if he had something to do with a rambunctious ghost in the boombox. Neville grinned like a Chelsey cat and shrugged a shoulder at him. Tank laughed heartily, then abruptly commanded, "Well shit Niggah, don't just stand there; turn dat shit up Neville. Dat's what I'm tom'bout', Broderick," he said while snapping his fingers.

Following Shakur was a medley of silky grooves—The O'Jays, "Stairway to Heaven"; Maze, "Happy Feelins", "We Are One", "Joy and Pain". Minutes later, the soulful sounds of the Isley Brothers kicked in with, "That Lady", "Harvest", "It's your Thing". Al Green nourished their souls with, "Let's Stay Together" and Marvin Gaye with, "What's Going On". Sam Cooke rounded out the compilation with, "A Change is Gonna Come"!

Ahh, the rhythmic beats, Tank thought. How it had so ably fought back "the nothing" and

replaced it with something they could pin their hopes upon. The words and the music espoused realities. A community's tuning instrument, it silenced the pummeling, immobilizing fear, transposing it into a hope for better tomorrows.

In the spinning rhythm, the music danced from Tank's boombox into their souls. Broderick and Neville started tapping their feet while Tank's head bobbed and weaved.

The three-man party seemed more like the last supper overshadowed by each one's desperation to make the most of this momentous occasion. In other respects, it served as a crude reminder that any second, the hot, tepid air they were basking in and the musical bliss that had mesmerized them could be supplanted with their spilled blood wafting in the air.

Chapter 7. Cop Encounter

The 9-1-1 dispatcher's high-pitched voice ricocheted off the police scanner into Officer's Max Kane and Deavon Haley's eardrums.

"Suspects armed and dangerous! All African American males. Standby for the description."

Suspect one, approximately twenty; 6'0; in a black hooded tea-shirt, matching shorts, and Nike tennis shoes. Suspect two, approximately seventeen; 5'6; in blue jeans, a black pullover tea shirt, and black combat boots. Suspect three, approximately nineteen; 5'9; in blue jeans, an embroidered white and gold tea shirt, and black low-top boots.

"Suspect three has a two-inch, greyish mark across one of his eyes, likely a birthmark. His mother is in law enforce—"

There was an earsplitting chatter before the radio petered out. Seconds later, dispatch returned and said, "Do you copy on suspect descriptions and that suspect three's mother is with law enforcement?"

"Copy," Kane said.

The three suspects had allegedly robbed an Asian-owned liquor store, five blocks south of Cobb Park. According to dispatch, they had fled the crime scene in a red, Dodge Durango.

"Time to go crack some skulls!" Kane ordered.

"Easy now cowboy! IA's already so far up our asses they can see the pink," Haley cautioned.

"You take it easy! IA ain't working these streets. We are! Out here, we are the enforcers of law and order. And we cannot just go letting these punks run rampant."

Haley lamented, "I'm just saying man, we could save ourselves a lot of hassles in the end, if we play it by the book."

"Lose that police academy bullshit recruit! It ain't got shit to do with the way things are out

here in these streets.”

“Meaning what exactly?”

“Meaning, these black sumbitches will pump some lead up your Lilly white ass and rush to go find the nearest chicken joint.”

Reaching into his uniform shirt pocket, Kane retrieved a burnt-orange strand of yarn and began twirling it through his fingers. It was the only personal effect clipped from the knit shirt Jada wore the night she was murdered. Years pass her death, it still had some semblance of Jada smell intermixed with the smell of dried blood. Haley eyed him suspiciously, with silent anxiety. When the yarn emerged, shit was about to hit the fan.

Kane yelled out loud, “Fucking punks! Nothing but a bunch of ratchet alligator baits!”

Persuaded that all Black people were culpable in his daughter’s death, Kane vowed they would be shown the same mercy the ruthless thug, Cevonté Anthony, showed Jada. His eyes darted left then right, scanning the terrain with a steady, indignant gaze. He made a hard right onto West Broadway, hooking another right a quarter of a mile up the road onto Spencer. His pulse raced; his heartbeat an arrhythmic thump up against his ribcage; his breathing a roaring gasp for air.

Traversing the street scene, his thoughts shifted gear into the monstrosities that enveloped him. The urine stench grazing his nostrils; water gushing into manholes; broken forty-ounce bottles; the squirming black lives pounding the pavements.

Passing another rat-infested block, he skinned his lips at the debris clinging to corroded fences like sticky cotton to stems; paper cluttering grimy streets like a meteor-strike of leaflets had just hit the ground. Just before Ryle Ave, the gloomy scene resembled a war zone outfitted with sirens zooming up the feeder road. His next right was onto Memorial Drive, County Hwy-509.

The engine roared as he knifed in front of a sleek Mercedes Benz. Sneering at the dark skin hooligan whose haughty gold rope emulated a tourniquet taught around a whopping neck, a chill ran

through his body. His mind flashed back to Cevonté Anthony, the baby-killing machine. Hands hovering over his gun, he realized he could drop the fool in an instant, right there where he sat, and nary a decent, law-abiding citizen would give a rat's ass. But the latest Code 3 had taken precedence over his insatiable urge to exact revenge. Without words he thought, *Motherfucker you gonna get yours. All in due time.*

A sharp left onto Main Street; a right onto Presidential Boulevard and the park was within shouting distance. At long last, he would press these young jigaboos; push them to the brink of anguish; provoke them into some ill-advised move that would justify his deadly cause.

By 1:30 PM, the three ace boon coons - so-called accomplices - were still basking in their mini-reunion, the muggy heat of July pressing down on their bronze skins like Jupiter's Sun. From the squad car, Kane took immediate notice of the variances in dispatch's descriptions and the three young men before him.

Tank, twenty, a towering 6'2, was sporting a charcoal-grey, Barry Bonds two-piece short set, Adidas tennis shoes. Neville, eighteen, seeming much shorter than his 5'8 stature, was rocking a mauve-colored hairstyle, straight-leg jeans, a multicolor, red, white, and blue short-sleeve pullover, and colorful Alberto Moretti shoes. Broderick, nineteen, 5'11; was in his conservative blue slacks, white collared tea-shirt, and black sandals. The heat was wreaking havoc on the greyish birthmark across his left eye, causing it to flare.

Cobbs Park epitomized a small, abandoned parking lot encased within a rot-iron fence not so distinct from prison bars constructed from sturdy steel. A backdrop to the run-down homes tagged with graffiti, a blot of landscape, which was nothing like those chic communities with manicured gardens, pristine benches, and poinsettias year-round.

Entering from North Main through the rot-iron fence, across patches of dirt and grass, the

patrol car nearly sideswiped a grey statute barely missing the stony bench where Kivon “Tank” Willis had just copped a squat. Killing the engine, Kane and Haley slid from the unit onto the scene like sails slithering up a fifty feet mast. Accosting their suspects, Kane and Haley’s guns were already drawn, locked, and loaded. Judging by an itchy finger on the trigger, Haley knew Kane was too anxious to pop a cap into the first one of them who so much as flinched the wrong way.

“Hands up where I can see ’em, now!” Kane yelled, his merciless gaze radiating the power to dismember each, one by one, without a second thought.

“Let me see some identification!” His partner added, his gun sweeping from one to the next.

Instinctively, the young men froze; too terrified to move a muscle and likewise confused about which order to comply with first. Sensing they were awaiting the green light, Kane ordered, “Go ahead, what the fuck are you waiting for?”

“Well it’s in our pockets,” Broderick said realizing he had spoken out of turn for the other two.

“I just don’t want there to be any—” his voice trailed off.

“Any what?” Kane asked, viciously.

“Look man,” Broderick seethed, “we ain’t out here tryin to be no statistics ya’ heard me? I mean black dudes wrongfully killed for doing nuthin’.”

Kane hissed, “Hey Jellybean! No one asked for your fuckin’ commentaries, did they? Just get your ga’damn license out!”

Rummaging through their pockets for identification under the hypervigilant eyes and unforgiving stares of a squad of coldblooded cops was surreal. Detective Anjanae Bridges’s earlier admonishments had come back like chickens to roost. The warm, grainy feeling of impending doom which crept up into their throats, was analogous of molten steel being forced-fed down the larynx. This was the sensation each time a Paterson black and gold rolled by or its gung-ho occupants

ensnared them without cause. This was the sentiment, supplemented by the veracity that there was not a damn thing they could do about the feet firmly planted upon their necks.

Too pragmatic for his own good; always needing everything to make logical sense, Neville began pulling strands from his two-tone colored scalp. The nervous tic customarily signified his anxiety and his silent demand for equilibrium, and answers. Adjusting the piercing under his tongue he said, “What Neville would like to know is why is he and his homeboys being hassled like this!”

“And who the fuck is Neville?” Kane asked, appraising the stringy-looking skin and bones in the multicolored top and skinny leg jeans.

“Neville is Neville, and he wants to know, did he and his homies do something wrong?”

Neville wasn’t homosexual nor what some would call, effeminate but he wasn’t hyper-masculine either. He was just Neville, undefined by societal norms or categorizations and oblivious to how his flamboyant, metrosexual ways often bought him strife.

This is why his two unsung heroes, Broderick and Tank, came to his rescue that day in the schoolyard. That and the fact that they couldn’t stomach the pummeling his scrawny ass was about to take. Bridges and Willis had intervened to avert the ass-whipping two older boys were about to hand Neville just for looking and acting too damned sweet.

Prior to this, Neville had no friends especially none who’d put their necks on the line. The boy was like caviar, an acquired taste. Even more so, a bitter pill; too clever, too snobby, too loudmouth; and too likely to write checks his narrow behind couldn’t cash.

“You and your homies fit the description of black suspects who just robbed a liquor store,” Haley responded.

Upon hearing this Neville looked at the cop like he had two heads. Appraising himself, the loudmouth said, “Neville, does not have to steal. Evidently, he already has everything he needs.”

“Listen here, you switch-hitting, punk-ass, Carleton Banks wannabe—” Kane belted.

Cutting him off Neville demanded, “I ax’d you, what suspects, and what liquor store? We’ve been in this park since around noon.”

“Yeah, and I don’t drink,” Broderick added contemptuously.

“You li’l fuckers better watch your tone!” Kane said messaging his service weapon; flicking the safety to an off position.

“And that ain’t the story we got,” Haley said to Neville.

“Then maybe you got the wrong story. Y’all got a warrant cop?” Tank asked bearing his gold-plated teeth.

“No, we have probable cause asshole!” Kane responded.

“What probable cause?” Tank asked, standing in defiance; showcasing his muscularly built biceps and a six-pack, courtesy of three-a-day workouts.

“You hard of hearing boy? You’re the suspects who just robbed the AM/PM Liquor store on Rosa Parks Boulevard,” Kane responded.

“Robbed a liquor store? Wait, what?” Broderick asked as if hearing the allegations for the first time.

Brushing his hands through thick cornrows which resembled gracefully plowed fields Tank said, “So now, suspicious-looking suspects hang out in parks, slaving over barbeque pits, grilling chicken and burgers.”

To Kane he stated, “And apparently, they do so while grooving to oldies and goodies music. Is that it cop?”

“Like I said, you fit the description of the suspects, especially your thuggish ass!” Kane said.

“How am I looking like a suspect? Why, because I’m black?”

“Oh the race card, that’s what you little Al Sharptons always do when caught red-handed. Good luck with that bullshit. It ain’t working today.”

“I think this is a mistake,” Broderick said intervening.

At this, Kane stood on end. “Did anybody asked you what you fuckin’ thought? No more talk!” The scolding was from a hard-held voice, filled with temper.

“Okay, aight! Freedom of speech violation! Constitutional right infringement! Motherfucka, we know our rights. Our lawyer gonna have a field day with this bullshit,” Tank threatened, flashing a smile.

At this, Kane spun around and leaped a few paces to where Tank stood, a few feet away from the unit.

Getting in his face, he asked, “Is that so convict? You threatening me boy? Get yo’ ass over there!” He said pushing him toward the squad car. “Hands-on the hood!”

Holstering his firearm, he wrestled Tank’s arms around his back and whispered, “So, you like sticking up liquor stores huh convict?” Scheming, he inspected Tank’s person for weapons and contrabands.

“Yeah right. And I see yo’ punk-ass like rubbin’ on niggahs!” Tank snapped back, in a mean-spirited tone. Kane looked around, over his shoulders. Haley was engrossed in his own routine, patting down Broderick and Neville. Content his partner was oblivious to his dirty intentions, Kane withdrew his nightstick and shoved it forcefully into Tank’s rib cage. Tank’s body caved to the might of the billy club. His knees buckled but somehow kept him propped up. Lifting him upright, Kane slammed Tank into the hood. Blood squirted from his nostrils. There was a slight groan in reverence to the excruciating pain enveloping his body.

Applying the silver cuffs, Kane added, “How ya’ like that, you black sumbitch?” Then in a whispery tone asked, “Still think em’ gay?”

“What happened?” Haley asked.

“Mr. Bo Jackson here, took a swing at me.”

Tank's scream was blood-curdling. "You a motherfucking liar! Dirty-ass cop!"

Suspiciously appraising an embattled Tank, Haley eyeballed his partner questionably, then motioned to go run the licenses. A few minutes later the voice on the radio blared, "Suspect three, Broderick Bridges, clear, no priors. Suspect two, Neville Lloyd, clear, no priors. Suspect three, Kivon Willis, bench warrant, failure to appear, traffic citation, 2012."

While Tank Willis was being manhandled by Kane, Bridges and Lloyd, having heard the dispatcher's clearance, took off running for their lives, Broderick in one direction, Neville in the other. Gritting his teeth, Kane slung Tank into the back seat of the squad car like he was cheap luggage. Slamming the rear passenger door, he instinctively drew his firearm from its holster, held it up with both hands, pointed it toward where he'd last seen Broderick and Neville, squeezed off a few rounds. A plume of white smoke emitted as the spent metal casing crashed to the pavement forcefully.

Pounding his fist against the roof of the squad car, the crazed, unhinged *veteran* cop yelled, "Shit! Damn!" Fuck! These black-ass motherfuckas! Fuck fuck fuck!" Then, on his radio yelled, "Suspects on the run! Suspects on the run!"

Kane stormed to the driver's side, with a trepidatious, nail-biting Haley in tow, jammed the key into the ignition, took off after the cleared suspects as fast as the Crown Victoria would go. He slammed on the gas, shooting out from the curb. The wheels squealed until they found traction and then dug into the roadway like iron claws.

Broderick surged forward, through the decrepit alleyways of Patterson, his leather soles slapping against the gnarled, eroded asphalt; past the narrow, grimy, blocks, weaving in and out from behind dismal rowhouses, past graffiti-strewn tenements and abandoned storefronts. Onto the broken sidewalks that protruded like a jagged tooth from a cracked curb, Broderick juttied, sprinted as if it was his last chance at preserving life, as though, his prolonged existence depended on every

bit of vitality in those lower extremities.

On every broken street corner, drug dealers plied their trade and pimps peddled their hos, unphased by a black kid on the run, whizzing by, knowing it was just a part of the routine of being pressed, and hassled and squeezed by five-O. He dashed and scurried, personifying every bit of the representation of lightning-fast, hat flipped, jackbooted thugs white privileged people had disparagingly claimed all black men to be. In the background, the distant wail of sirens could be heard cutting through the colour of day, its faint glow of red as bloodshot as the beads of red sweat dripping from his brow, its cobalt blue as luminescent as an otherworldly glow.

Reaching Spencer Avenue, Bridges wondered about the fate of Tank, his partner-in-crime, riding three deep with two determined, cold-hearted, militant cops who wanted nothing more than to put his black ass in a cage. Better yet, put a bullet through his brains, just for simply existing, breathing, for having the audacity for proudly being who he was, a black man, unfearful of trifling, trashy-ass cops! Cops who disregarded street cred and could care less that out on Patterson's streets, courage meant simply being proud to be black; and that's what made Kevin "Tank" Willis so dangerous. As real as this was, and notwithstanding the hot anger simmering beneath Broderick's skin, he knew there was nothing he nor his since of esprit de corps, could do for Tank now.

Chapter 8. A Mother's Love

Friday, July fourth, 2014, 1:30 PM

The call over the police scanner, disengaged Bridges from her powwow with the criminal informant. Much of the detailed descriptions of the neighborhood bore a likeness to her residence of the past ten years. Similarly, one of the alleged suspect's profile displayed a striking resemblance to her only child, Broderick Detrick Bridges.

At first, she blew off the bellowing descriptions as happenstance. Then she heard the one distinguishing feature—a greyish birthmark covering the suspect's left eye. Broderick too manifested the unique marking which, contrary to medical forecast, would never fade away. Her kid was marked for life, seemingly distinct from any other kid on the Southside.

What little spark of hope existed within her, flickered and died when, another update pushed through the scanner.

“The suspect is a nineteen year-old male, on foot, heading in the vicinity of Tenth Avenue; armed and dangerous.”

Knowing Broderick's distaste for guns, Detective Bridges became both reassured and alarmed at this last.

“No, it couldn't be him,” she whispered to herself.

Either the alleged firearm had ruled out Broderick or the facsimile he was carrying was being mistaken for a weapon. As an afterthought, she recalled her son's cellphone in his hands as he dashed out the door, earlier that morning.

“Dammit!” She said at the bad feeling in the pit of her gut.

It had hit her. Cops in her precinct were notorious for mistaking cellphones for firearms.

“I gotta go!” she told her CI.

“Why, what's up Queen?”

“Call you later!”

“We ain’t even talk about this shipment of hooch comin’ into the port yet!”

“Then, call me later!”

Leaving Trent standing there, mouth wide open, Bridges hopped into the black Range Rover, fired up the engine, and peeled South on East 26th Street in the direction of 11th Avenue. Skidding away on tires, she gunned it down 11th Avenue. Almost clipping a tricked out hoopdy, she knifed in front of a Buick LeSabre taking Lafayette Street by storm.

A few more right and left turns brought Passaic County 650 into sight. Passaic turned into East Haledon Avenue. The Wells Fargo ATM to her right prompted a sharp left turn onto North 7th Street. A few more left turns brought her to her street.

By the time she arrived, six City of Paterson police cars had already lined the street corner, barricading her red, brick condominium at 130 Sherwood Avenue.

Standing outside black and gold squad cars bearing the daunting Paterson police shield, were seven trigger-happy policemen seemingly on a mission to kill. Clothed in the usual battle gear, the troops displayed the menacing portrait of hungry sharks with razor-sharp, gangrenous teeth. The detective sensed blood in the water.

Peeling herself out of the Range Rover, Detective Bridges noticed the seven red dots already trained onto Broderick’s scrawny torso. Scurrying across the patch of dirt and grass, she turned to face her son. Clasp the sides of his face, she peered forcefully into his eyes for answers. She saw all she needed to know. While no words were necessary, Broderick was already fixing his mouth to make his case. In that instant, Anjanae could palpate the blistering fury beneath the surface of her son's skin.

“Mom, you know I know better than to put us in a bad situation.”

“I know,” she said confidently.

“I only left after hearing they had nothing on me.”

“Just let me handle this. It’ll all work out just fine.”

“But mom, wait!”

“Broderick I got this!” she said fixing him with that courageous stare.

As an afterthought she requested, “Now, let me see that smile you know I love so much.”

The traces of a pained, half-smile washed across Broderick’s face, then quickly vanished into thin air. Kissing him on the cheek, Anjanae whispered her praise, “Now that's my boy,” while bravely fighting against her own internal discord.

Given the life expectancy of young, innocent black men shot and killed for no good reason, Detective Anjanae Bridges dared not fault her boy for running. In that instant, fleeing was better than the alternative. That she was sworn to uphold the law seemed to be of little consequence. Mentally visualizing the lifeless bodies of young black men in county morgues with toe tags dangling, she trembled at the veracity. She would feel this way, even if her child was guilty of the most heinous crime.

Discerning his innocence, she turned her back shielding him; the red dots now trained on her. Eyeballing the undercover detective through scandalous eyes was reciprocal, their withering stares connoted derision and disdain.

“What’s this all about?” She asked stifling her panic; stoking her urge to keep the situation calm. No response came forth. They continued watching her through anxious, cautionary brows; across carefully appraising eyes.

At long last a black cop, Harden Jackson spoke.

“Mam, need you to step away from the suspect!” His abrasive tone was filled with contempt. A look of unbridled fury affirmed he could care less about the outcome of this face-off.

It was evident, twenty-five years on the force had calcified Jackson; entitled him to throwing his hefty weight around. As well, he had long ago come to grips with a few veracities. He was old, husky and out of shape; and cursed with aching bones; generally, a colossal heap of damaged goods.

Notwithstanding his deteriorating state, he had paid his dues. And no middle age, petulant sister with an attitude was about to usurp his authority. Even if, his superiors had knowingly used him as a pawn, recklessly assuming a brother whose features bore a stark likeness to Sowetans had any pull on a zealot Nubian queen with an ax to grind, he wasn't about to cave to the pressure of black-on-black solidarity.

"Whatever you're accusing him of, he didn't do it!" She blurted out.

"That's not for you to decide," Jackson hollered back.

Sensing where she was headed, a fuming rage consumed Jackson like a furnace fed more coals. He was fed up with all the black lives matter movements. Tired of being caught in the middle; too black for some and for others, not black enough. Drained by young black boys putting themselves in compromising situations knowing the consequences. Infuriated by how they blatantly discounted the fact that they had already been convicted in the womb.

"Now, get out of the way!" Jackson yelled fixing her with a mean-spirited glare.

In that instance, Anjanae noticed a trembling to his stance accompanied by slight rocking, and a series of unsteady movements. Consequently, she had sensed without him letting on that he was simply showboating, all talk and no action.

"He is wanted for questioning and we're taking him in!"

"So I suppose that is why it takes six police cars with seven cops rushing the scene, guns drawn, ready to shoot. No thanks! I've seen the aftereffects of your *questioning* young, black men."

"This is your last warning!"

"Look, you are not shooting my son! Not today!"

“Mam!” He blurted, short and crisp.

“*Like I said*, I ain’t standing over the grave of my son! If anything, he’ll be putting *me*, in the grown!

Detective Anjanae Bridges cooled ten degrees, intuiting that it was up to her to bring the situation under control. Recalling she might have missed an offramp earlier; an entry point where she might penetrate the teflon-tough exterior of Jackson’s withering soul, she had a hunch. Until now, she hadn’t considered the fact that she was one of them. Hadn’t so much as revealed that she was also in law enforcement, albeit, undercover.

For the last five of her fifteen years on the force, Bridges had worked undercover in the Narcotics, Vice Bureau Command, while they worked three streets over, in Community Policing. Their paths having never crossed, she did not know them from a hole in the wall. As well, they had no inkling of her existence either.

While no one would cast dispersions on the detective’s next move, they likely would characterize it a grave rookie mistake. Even still, many would cut her slack considering her reckless abandon was acted out in the heat of passion. With a noble cause. Tempers were flaring; the situation was spiraling out of control; she was petrified she could lose her sole-surviving son. From where she stood, her options weren’t many.

Without warning, Bridges did the unthinkable. Lifting her shirt, she reached for the shield bearing the PNP badge while simultaneously stating, “I’m an undercover detective—” Her voice trailed off at the site of him. *He*, was the cop from the TV, who mercilessly killed that unarmed kid back in 2010.

From the middle of the ranks, Officer Max Judah Kane had emerged yelling, “*Gun! Gun! Gun!*”

Steadying himself onto the patrol car, Kane flexed his neck muscles. And then, squeezed off four rounds.

Detective Anjanae Bridges' body stiffened; the rounds fossilizing her like a pillar of salt; her blood pouring out like a civ, saturating the patch of dirt and grass around her feet. There was a slight three-second pause, then six more rounds from her fellow officer's gun sliced through her punctured carcass. In that moment, the transfiguration of light decelerated and the cacophony of sounds became stifled, muted. There was a pulsating beat; a cadence to the words of her execution; the cold, penetrating steel Anjanae Bridge's judge and jury.

One cop yelled from the rear, "Cease fire!"

Another cop echoed with, "Lower your firearms!"

But by then, the slugs had already penetrated her as if she was a nobody, just a heap of flesh, blood, and bones; blasting a cavity in her back; a hole in her chest, and puncturing other areas of her anatomy, spurting crimson red into the subsiding day. Her face was congealed, her eyes gaping, mouth slack, as she was propelled backward.

"I ain't standing over the grave of my son. If anything, he'll be putting me in the gown!"

Those were the last words Broderick Detrick Bridges remembered hearing before his mother's lifeless body collapsed on top of him.

Three of the bullets had entered her chest, rifled through her small-framed body before exiting and hitting him in the shoulder, side, and right thigh. It was a wonder, he was not also dead. But under his mother's weight, he seemed lifeless. He felt his heartbeat but none of his muscles would react. In a fraction of seconds, his mother had been plucked from the earth like stray weeds.

Chapter 9. Media Frenzy

Later that evening under a blanket of pouring rain, a local news reporter, Sophie Hunter, stood outside Anjanae's home fiercely gripping a microphone. Knees knocking, she stared intently around, taking in the different shades of black faces eyeing her like she was shark bait. Why the heck, of all people, a milky-white skin woman with skin blotches and almond colored hair was asked to cover the murder of a dark skin sister, was beyond her reasoning. She was no Don Lemon, and certainly no April Ryan, the black voices of CNN.

The background information provided was scant. All her senior editor-in-chief, Lucas Hart, had imparted was that she and her crew were the closest in proximity to the murder scene. Of course, Lucas wouldn't be Lucas if he didn't threaten grave consequences if she fucked this up.

Uncertain of whether to use descriptors of African American woman, black female, or woman of color, Hunter inwardly thought, *fuck-it*, and winged her opening line with, "A black police detective was killed today while intervening in a police matter involving her son."

She tried to appear solemn knowing, no matter how she played her hand, she was destined to come across scripted and flat. Worst, her colorful audience were no body's fool.

Slightly bobbing her head downward, she avoided eye contact but managed to say more. "Detective Anjanae Bridges, age forty-five, a fifteen-year veteran on the Paterson police force was gunned down in front of her home on Sherwood Drive."

Swaying her slim, soaking wet body from side to side, she announced, "Detective Bridges was DOA at Paterson County General Hospital, from fatal gunshot wounds."

Barely surviving the mixture of 'bitch, you're out of your league' and 'we could skin your white ass alive' looks, she inclined her head in the direction of the more conciliatory expressions which foretold a desperate need for answers.

Her cautiously confident side began to emerge and she realized, she actually could do this.

Why? Because, neither her privileged upbringing or her low IQ of culture and ethnicity, superseded people's pain and misery.

Besides, it was not like she was writing the deceased's life story, just imparting information about her tragic death. But tell that to the nerves rippling low down in her stomach. Overcoming as best she could, she went on to say, "The first four bullets hit Detective Bridges in the face, abdomen, side, and chest before exiting and hitting her son."

Off to the side, a small group of protestors waved "Me Next" signs in Hunter's face. Indulging them, she nodded her head before continuing.

"Seconds later, a barrage of more gunshots were fired, hitting the detective's body in several other areas."

A black man behind her yelled, "Damn! Even black mama's ain't safe out here no mo'!"

Seizing the chance at solidarity, capitalizing upon the opportunity to bridge the gaps between her whiteness and their blackness, Hunter intimated, "And that right there is the heartfelt sentiment." Peering deeply into the camera, she pointedly asked, "How is it, that a nation that fervently boasts its decency, has strayed so far from the path when the upstanding mother of a young, innocent, unarmed, African male must now absorb bullets, in order to protect his life from corrupt, ruthless, mentally deranged cops who can't see past their hatred of young black men?"

In that instant, Hunter had earned the right to speak on Black people's behalf. She had spoken authentically without the use of white fragility, minus the white-splaining, exclusive of shifting of focus or blaming Black people for their own downfall. She was like a Lady T (Teena Marie), serenading Black people in their own and White people's voices about the dirty, Black people had been done.

It was as if the bad-ass vanilla chick, had genuinely felt their pain and thus had well-earned the array of head nods, finger snaps and thumbs-up, a vociferous confirmation erupting from the

animated crowd, spewed in every direction, and cresting like waves.

The brother and his cadres colorfully intoned, “Truedat...Truedat...real talk...say that shit, say that shit!”

Emboldened, Hunter continued, “The life of Anjanae Bridges’ sole survivor, Broderick Detrick Bridges hangs in the balance at Paterson County General Hospital. None of the officers suffered harm, or for that matter, was ever endangered.”

The fatal gunshot wounds which killed his mother, impaled his left shoulder, right thigh, and grazed his left side.”

The following morning, Police Commissioner Devdan Magnus picked up The Patterson Herald and read:

The details are still sketchy but reportedly, when Detective Bridges arrived at her home at around 2:30 PM, seconds after Paterson PD responded, she allegedly engaged in a manner of obstructing justice. After rushing to her son’s side, the detective stepped in front of him as if using herself as a human shield. Apparently, Bridges was attempting to guard her son from xenophobic cops whom she feared were too anxious for another deadly kill.

“Dammit! Dammit! Dammit! Already fake news is spinning the story to their advantage! All about fucking ratings!” Magnus yelled, while reading on. Sipping from a cup of thick, black coffee, he whispered to himself, “We need to get out in front of this mess. And quickly,” he muttered before reading on:

That officer, the one who fired the first shots, is now on paid administrative leave pending an investigation. Further details remain sketchy on what prompted six other officers to discharge their weapons. The employment statuses of those officers is still being determined by law enforcement officials and of course, their union representatives.

Magnus, an imposing white male with broad shoulders and a swagger, arose to his full height of 5’10 and strutted across the floor towards his favorite spot in the Victorian house. He had chosen this upscale neighborhood in Paterson's Ettley’s Mill Historic District, for its charm; amassed with neat lawns, and old but well-kept houses which screamed quaintness and safety. Scanning the

landscape from his bay window, Magnus observed the cars crawling through the streets like frenzied ants to a picnic. He took one last sip of the lukewarm coffee; seemed not to mind its temperature or bitterness. Those were the least of his troubles. Though, it was not like he hadn't forewarned the powers that be, that Kane was a ticking timebomb, a disaster waiting to happen. Or, that he would be the one cleaning up the mess. He disposed of the cup on the windowsill and frantically patted down his coat for his cellular. His finger hovered over the speed dial button as he rang Daren Foster, his police chief.

TWNN was the first national news source to broke the story. Offering their two cents were journalists, Augustus Bonnick—Holding Them Honorable; Lilah Mcquistion—Lilah Mcquistion UpClose; and Ahmad Amill—TWNN, Nightly with Ahmad Amill. Later in the evening, Alvin Evilsizor of Evilsizor Live, was set to weigh in.

Ahmad Amill led the scathing criticism calling Bridges' death a senseless murder, and PNPd's betrayal of one of their own. Amill continued with a smug remark about, "Blue lives killing black lives" which he said, "no longer matter in this country."

Among his panelists was Glenn Fletcher, the short, fat, oval headed Bush supporter, known for his smart-mouth, trash-talking and anti-black rhetoric. Not waiting on the scripted head nod from Amill, Glenn Fletcher insisted, "No one should rush to judgement or get ahead of the investigation into this shooting."

Fletcher was already touting that the victim was going for her gun and not trying to reveal her shield. As a dig, he added, "Nor, do I believe she was trying to convey that she was a cop, as many in the Black Lives Matter movement insists."

Fletcher got a healthy portion of blowback from one of the black contributors when he voiced coldly that, "This detective never attempted to inform the officer that she was with law enforcement."

Bitterly, Kendyll Garrett blasted him with, “This detective, has a name!”

Garrett then belted angrily, “In the state of panic, Bridges likely thought first about preserving her son’s life and hardly gave much thought to preserving her own.”

Another black woman said sarcastically, “Hope you got that Fletch. If not, then let me spell it out for you.”

Mouth set in a firm line, Fletcher flashed her a vicious, satanic glance that scarcely bespoke his animosity.

“Your son’s imminent death,” continued Garrett, “has a way of making all forms of rationality disappear. Sadly, a black mother has to be put in the position of having to choose.”

The panel erupted when Dirk Danker, formerly, the defense attorney for Jordie Zimmerit, the acquitted self-appointed vigilante and murderer of a Jacksonville Florida teen, Trey Martinson, chimed in. Danker stressed emphatically, “My sources have already conveyed the unlikelihood of an indictment.”

“Who are your sources, white supremacists?” Garrett interrogated.

Danker regarded Garrett coldly out of flint-blue eyes before stating, “While I resent the implication that I associate with white supremacists, whether you like it or not Ms. Garret, police are backed by policy when they are forced split-second decisions, and especially when they involve ominous, hostile suspects.”

Another black sister, the editor of “Power Up Magazine” burst in with, “Yeah, and Detective Anjanae Bridges was making split-second decisions too. Saving her boy’s life.”

Kishana Burns, the radical, big boned former senator from Ohio sounded off. At first, her words seemed measured. As dignified as her slicked back, tightly cropped, purple-tinged hairdo, and the curled bon which crowned the dome of her head.

Massaging her strategically organized silver studs descending from earlobe to ear tip, she

asked, “I wonder just how many bullets do these white cops think it takes to subdue a small, black woman anyway?”

“Subdue, you mean murder don’t you?” Kendyll Garrett asked.

Smiling mischievously, Burns shot back with, “Well yes, that too.”

Refocusing her ire onto Dirk Danker, Burns prodded, “I know you are not going to try that old, tired rhetoric about Black people being generally harder to subdue, in this women’s case.”

Raising himself to an erect position, Danker retorted, “Those are your words, Burns! Not mine.”

“Hmmpth,” she said dismissively. “I mean, isn’t it enough you people already fancy yourselves the boss of Black people?”

“You people?” Danker asked, while grating his chin with his index finger. Squinting his beady eyes, he offered nothing more in response.

Snickering at the mouthy defense attorney tucking his tail, Amill pointed out that a press release from the police chief was expected within the next few days.

Chapter 10. The Press Conference

Ebenezer Missionary Baptist Church was one of the treasure coves, white politicians routinely tapped to get black votes. And its prominent pastor, Doctor Ezequiel Caldwell, was among the first summoned when law enforcement needed a pacifist. The sun gracefully allowed her rays to cascade through the stained glass windows bearing a white adaptation of a Messiah on an old, rugged cross.

The temperature was frying-pan hot in there, not just on the account of faulty ACs or broken ceiling fans. Warm bodies had jam-packed the church house; their seething demand for answers raising the mercury level.

Tattered paper fans bearing portraits of Mahalia Jackson and MLK were hardly suitable for the blistering heat shimmying off drenched bodies. The reading on the thermostat affixed to a brilliant-red colored wall was 105 degrees Fahrenheit. The stakes were high and the marching orders plain, “Whatever you do Chief Foster, do not go in there pissing Black people off.”

Police Chief Daran Foster, flanked by Mayor DelVonte Dorsey on his left and Deputy Chief A'dré Winston on his right, stood at the podium to deliver a patronizing press release. Foster's two-toned face, a fusion of grainy black and espresso brown, rivaled his fluctuating expressions of somberness, stoicism, and irritation. Although, his square jaw and high cheek bones feigned resolve.

Using a saturated handkerchief to dab sweat from his brow, the twenty-nine year law enforcement veteran announce, “Police officers arrived at Detective Bridges home after trailing her son who was a person of interest in a matter for which he was wanted for questioning.”

Traversing the blank stares and judgmentally nodding foreheads, he continued.

“Seconds later, Detective Bridges arrived, and proceeded to interfere with police’s attempts to take her son into custody.”

Before he could verbalize his next words, Veneshia Epps, the highly inquisitive, very self-

assured reporter from the African Examiner cut him off.

“Chief Foster, did dispatch not inform two of your officers that the alleged suspect, Broderick Bridge’s mother was a police detective?”

Deputy Chief Winston intervened with, “Folks, if we’re going to get through this in an orderly fashion, we must ask you to hold your questions until the end.”

“Well nothin’ was orderly about the way they kil’t that sister in cold blood!” A black critic from the back of the room shouted.

“Alright now, keep it real baby!” Another older black woman said agreeably.

As if awakened out of a drunken stupor, a boozier off to the side chimed in with, “If it was a black man, kil’t a white woman, I wonder if it would ‘a been the same results!”

“Tell ‘it like it T-I-IS brother!” A thinly built Nation of Islam representative in a charcoal suit, colorful bowtie, and Patent leather shoes, blurted out.

Then added, “I am sick and tired of these power-hungry Clarence Thomas’s parading around here like they done forgot where they came from.

Waving a Koran he added, “Actin’ like these blue-eyed devils wouldn’t just as soon string their black asses up to a tree!”

To that someone in the audience shouted, “Fo’ real though. That’s real talk, ma’brutha!”

Foster reclaimed the podium. Snatching the mic from Winston, he shouted, “Now wait! Hold up one, damn minute!”

“Now ain’t that sumthin.” Cuss ‘in in the lord’s house.”

This rebuke came from an elderly, black woman with scarcely any signs of pleasure and enjoyment in her facial expression.

Foster jerked his head in her direction and shot her a demoralizing look. Snapping her teeth, Ester Ross rolled her narrow, brown eyes back at him.

For some, Foster's colorful outbursts; albeit quite melodramatic, seemed to resonate. Others, found his theatrics to be an old spiritual song that was too drawn out.

"While you all are looking to crucify a brother, realize I am not the enemy here! My own son, the best child a parent could ask for, was killed by a Patterson County Sherriff, who by the way, was white."

After a heart-breakingly long pause he resumed thinking, *That ought to shut their mouths.*

"As much as I wanted to, I could not fault that man. He was in a dark alley. To him, Darren Junior looked like a suspicious suspect walking aggressively toward a lone sheriff without any backup"

Foster's face became stony, body stiffened, and his wordsmithing appeasements was akin to navigating through landmines.

"Sheriff Andy Pyle mistook a tattoo on Darren Junior's right shoulder, the sports jacket, and the wrestling trophy he had just won as fitting the profile of a suspect," he said through sighs.

"I might add, a suspect who had just pistol-whipped an elderly lady on the Southside. Pyle felt his own life was in danger."

"My Lord," said another old woman whose inquiring and sympathetic brows was furrowed with many peaks and trenches.

Jabbing his temple, he asked, "You think my mind didn't go exactly where yours is headed? My boy ain't never hurt anybody. But justice does not come without a price! Neither does this job!"

For the moment, the crowd considered the veracity of Foster's pain and reclassified his ability to relate.

"As I was saying, the situation escalated, policemen feared for their lives. Regrettably, Detective Bridges was shot when she motioned to retrieve what was believed to be a weapon from under her shirt."

With this last, the fever pitch began to rebuild. The carefully crafted justifications had the makings of a coverup. The smokescreen wreaked of another lame excuse of cops fearing some non-existent, self-contrived threat of bodily harm. The bland looks now turned into contemptuous stares. The silent persecutions transmitted his way were capable of eating him whole, and alive. Not by design, Foster had re-entered troubled waters.

Refusing to give into any notions his officers acted with impunity, Foster glossed over the realism that universally, a target was on the backs of every black man alive. Neither would he concede to the likelihood that Broderick Bridges was profiled because he was black and his mother was shot for not knowing her place.

Persevering through clenched jaws and vicious stares he said, “Detective Bridges was transported to a nearby hospital where she was pronounced dead as a result of several gunshot wounds.”

Foster treaded carefully with his next series of words, dispensing each one as delicately as a tightrope walker traversing a spindly wire.

“A tragedy like this affects our entire community. Our officers at times are required to make split-second decisions.”

Adjusting the lapels of his jacket, he added, “They are empowered to do so when their lives are at stake. Sadly, this was one of those times.”

That instant, Foster felt the weight of his office bearing down on him like a hundred tons of lead. Running toward greener pastures, he quickly pointed at a group of front row of reporters and said, “We care about each and every person in this community.”

In deference to the skeptical stares, he announced, “Whether they are citizens or law enforcement, we are out there trying to keep everyone safe. And with that, I’ll take your questions.”

“Chief Foster, about my earlier question. Didn’t dispatch inform two of your officers that the

mother of the alleged suspect was a police detective?"

Foster was all too familiar with the local news reporter known for her three-inch stilettos and figure-hugging suits and ice water running through her veins.

"By the way, I'm Veneshia Epps. African Examiner. We've crossed paths before. But, under better circumstances."

"Yes, I know who you are Ms. Epps. But I will not speak to what was or was not told to my officers except to say that adherence to and/or any violation of protocols is being investigated."

Veneshia's large, brown eyes narrowed to a slit and Foster caught wind of the wheels turning in the woman's methodical mind.

"Did Detective Anjanae Bridges herself not inform officers on the scene that she was a police detective? Also, I cannot imagine why a 15-year veteran detective, one known for discipline and integrity would even think to resorting to using lethal force against her comrades."

Hesitating, Foster appraised the woman as if realizing for the first time how pretty, proud, and predatory she was. The particulars were not lost on him: a slit up the left side of her Balmain brand skirt, a subtle scent of Gardenia de Nuit; her seductive and fierce gazes; that underlying hint of danger - her trademark - better yet, her viper call sign.

First off, I cannot speak to what was or was not in Detective Bridge's mind. And if she did disclose her law enforcement status, that information was either not heard or unintelligible in light of everything going on." As a second thought he added, "But like I said, those details are still under investigation and the reactions of those officers are being reviewed against policy."

As a counter-attack, Epps allowed her strategic glare to skateboard across the room to her colleague from The USA Black Express.

Perceptively April Sanders asked, "Was Detective Bridges carrying a service weapon and if so, on which side was her firearm and on which side was her badge?"

Foster answered curtly with, “No information on that has been revealed as of yet.”

Feeling stonewalled, Sanders place her long, black finger on her chin, squinted, and suspiciously rolled her amber colored eyes back to Epps.

Epps then asked, “Why after the first series of gunshots did the other policemen fire on Detective Bridges? If I’m not mistaken, the resumption of shooting occurred within three seconds of the first officer ceasing fire.”

“Again, I do not want to get ahead of our investigations.”

Sighing Epps asked, “Chief, was there probable cause for harassing three young black men in Cobb Park and was it not made clear to officers Delaney and Kane that Broderick Bridge’s and Neville Lloyd’s records were clear?”

“Ms. Epps,” Foster huffed impatiently, “a liquor store had just been robbed and the suspects fit the description of the robbers! What more probable cause do you want?!”

With notable attitude to her voice Epps said, “But I am saying, no weapons were found, two of the suspects were cleared by your dispatch, and obviously the alleged suspects were in the park during the store robbery.”

Displaying a little attitude of his own, Foster threw his hands in the air, and let out a harsh breath. Epps continued dismissively.

“Worst case scenario, was that one of them had a bench warrant. I might add, it was from two years ago, and that it was for failing to appear on a traffic citation, nothing to do with robberies.”

“Think you got it figured out, don’t you? We follow the case where the case leads us. Next question!”

Sanders blurted, “But could it have been a case of mistaken identity?”

“Next question!”

Epps asked, “Chief, is this not another clear-cut case with blatant supporting evidence that

white cops may not be the best at policing men of color, especially black men?”

“Ah, I see. So now you’re pushing this idea of preventing white cops from policing black communities because of their so-called stinking attitudes and stereotypes, which impedes their fairness in enforcing the law.”

“Those are your words Chief, but since you went down that particular path, yes, I’d like to hear your thoughts on that very point.”

“Look. Is there mistrust between black communities and law enforcement? You damn right there is. When their lives are on the line, are some police officers worse at managing stress than others? Definitely.”

Epps knew, by the way he was over-explaining himself, she was in his head, under his skin, and relished in the thought.

He had tired of her pestilence, her divisiveness. He asked rhetorically, “Are there some bad actors on the police force?” Then said spitefully, “Of course there are, no different than bad reporters who report fake news.”

Epps gave a short, mirthless laugh and said, “That’s not the question, and last I checked, reporters are not the ones under the microscope, are they?”

Foster growled, "Take caution in your tone young lady! I was not finished. And please, do not interrupt me again!”

Epps gave him that defying look of death before allowing him to continue his rant.

Foster warned, “When you try to assign a color to the problem or suggest that only African Americans can police other African Americans, you are traveling down a slippery slope Ms. Epps. When that happens, we're all doomed to failure. And frankly Ms. Epps, I don’t buy it.”

Giving Epps time to collect herself, Sanders chimed back in with, “And yet Chief Foster, we see a disproportionate number of African Americans profiled, yanked out of their vehicles; women

manhandled on highways, men kicked, beaten, killed, and left for dead, by white cops.”

Having regained her composure, Epps tacked on, “And after the fact, we see civil suitcases being settled for millions of dollars.”

The uproar in the room consisted of clapping hands, Amens, and chants of, “Tell it like it T-I-IS sister!”

Choosing the path of least resistance, Foster asked, “Any other questions?”

A rail-thin woman with sassy Brunette hair, dark rimmed glasses, and smooth unlined face asked, “Chief, do you not fear backlash from the black community? Some are already questioning your allegiance.”

Heads popped around for a closer glimpse. Some of the black congregants appraised the plain-Jane looking woman as a mole who did not have a dog in the fight. But Camilla Wainwright was no infiltrator. She was no, “privileged” Madeline Weakley, the white NAACP executive, pretending to be black. She didn’t have to be. Aside from the relatability, her having birthed a black man’s son, the young, testy, bright, reporter from the Paterson Ledger had grown up among Black people; lived all her natural-born life in their communities; and had borne the scars to prove it. Hell, many in black community believed the honorary black distinction should be bestowed upon her, by default.

“Check my record,” Foster responded defensively. “You’ll find, I am frequently canvassing communities, taking the pulse of all residents, blacks, whites, or otherwise.”

Wainwright asked, “Yes but don’t blacks deserve more than just your delicate displays of unity and equality?”

Laughing bitterly, Foster replied, “Reasonable people know my sincerity and loyalty, Ms. Wainwright. I have no doubt they are in my corner.”

Resting his hands on the podium, Foster leaned forward and added, “And by the way Ms.

Wainwright, let me be crystal clear. I am not the Police Chief for *just*, the black community. I am the police chief for all citizens of Paterson, New Jersey.”

“Will you resign?” Epps asked.

“Absolutely not!” Foster roared. His antagonist was met with a stony gaze as he snapped, “No more questions. This news conference is over!”

Foster’s eyes seemed to swell and darken as he spoke, growing from the size of a penny to that of a quarter and shifting shades from copper-brown to a blazing amber. As he stepped away from the podium, his lips curled into an unimpressed snarl as he aggressively glowered at Epps one last time. He looked down on the journalist with contempt and glared at her menacingly, like he wanted to spit in her face.

The next day, special interest groups and citizens of Paterson’s black communities were calling for Chief Darren Foster’s termination, more so, his head on a platter. The character assignments ranged from, “sellout”, “Uncle Tom”, “figure head”, “Race-traitor,” everything but a child of God.

Chapter 11. Interment

At precisely twelve o'clock that afternoon, five stretched limousines escorted by Paterson police led the funeral procession through downtown traffic enroute to Ebenezer Missionary Baptist Church on North 145th Street. The funeral service for Detective Anjanae Bridges started promptly at its scheduled time of one o'clock PM.

Outside, a line reminiscent of a multicultural movement snaked around the two-story worship center, ending two blocks North. Inside the massive cathedral, many of the less fortunate mourners viewed the service courtesy of big-screen televisions in the overflow. From the rear, a door pushed open and unforgiving rays of sunlight flooded the interior. The fractured young man hobbling in on crutches was Broderick Bridges, in a shoulder sling covering bullet piercings; his shattered thigh in a translucent air splint. He was flanked by his partners-in-crime, Kevon "Tank" Willis and Neville Lloyd. Anjanae's tall, self-assured twin sister Jacquetta Morgan; her overweight and self-conscious elder brother, Irvin Bridges; and a bereft and demented Arleen Bridges, her mother, brought up the rear.

Broderick's beleaguered countenance exemplified a world where each day epitomized torture and nights resembled the deep recesses of the underworld. His embattled presence, the pantleg of his black suit cut mid-thigh, brought a stream of tears from puffy red and weeping eyes. Then came that long, onerous walk toward the front pew, reticent of death row inmates walking the last mile.

Upon seeing the glistening, mahogany casket with white lining; the silhouette of the lifeless soul laying within; the biting grip of death's sting pummeled Broderick well before he could take his next step. As if receiving some red alert that momentarily he would be seated before the open casket encasing his mother's corpse, his knees began to buckle.

"Hold up for a bit," Tank whispered.

In that instant, Tank's glaring bitterness, that day in Cobbs Park, returned to haunt him, in

spades. There no longer existed a need to begrudge his friend (Broderick) his living mother out of jealousy that his own mother, Bonita Willis, was already six feet under. Broderick Detrick Bridge's mother was dead! He had now joined the ranks of, "the motherless." Though Tank had not wished such miseries into existence, he burdened himself that it was so.

"Yeah, just take your time man. Neville knows you can do this."

Unpredictably, Bridges straightened his back, squared his shoulders, and responded, albeit through a series of sniffles and sobs, "You right, got this."

Her casket was a magnificent display of pageantry, adorned with all the frills; grand and regal like the ones fit for kings and queens. Crafted out of polished mahogany wood and etched with intricate designs, it was a testament of the well-deserved elegance, she was due. A twelve-by-twelve color photograph of the deceased – the late Detective Anjanae Bridges - in her Class-A black and gold uniform was propped up behind the casket by a wooden easel and framed with its own massive floral arrangements cascading around it like a rich tableau.

This too was the sentiment of the proud brother in the pulpit, a six feet four, towering pillar of black pride filling every inch of the resplendent black robe hanging a hairbreadth below his knees. There was nothing incongruous with his aged-to-perfection features. Not the straggly salt and pepper sideburns edging his wedge-shaped face, nor the short greyish afro crowning his head.

You could say Zeek was an old-school preacher with a new-school vibe. Gifted with a powerful whooping style of closing out sermons, many swore he was a man handpicked by God. Having preached so many souls to salvation; having triumphed over so many vicious lies and deceit, Zeek had earned the reputation of a homegrown clergyman who had been battle-tested. Assured his dues had been paid, not much rattled his cage or shook his resolve. He had stared down bigoted police chiefs; contested schoolboard superintendents; and instilled the fear of God into the most

notorious drug lords and brokered peace treaties between the most high-profile gangsters. He had married and counseled couples, christened their babies, and buried the young and old, always managing to overcome the foreboding burden of grief.

But today's heartache was poles apart from those varied experiences. The body lying before him was not the average congregant, it was Anjanae whom he remembered from when she was as tiny as a water droplet. Mindfully, he recaptured the image of her running around the church in pinned-back pigtails and sneakers too large for her small feet. How she exemplified that "no fear" persona and exuded unprecedented confidence. He dredged up memories of her wandering into his study one day boldly and unabashedly declaring her imminent dreams.

"I'm gonna become the first heroic black cop who locks up bad guys and put criminals away."

She had made good on those endeavors. Better yet, she was one of Paterson's finest.

He'd facilitated her public profession of faith; baptized her in his homegrown Pool of Bethesda; and appointed her to his mass choir. Now, here he was preaching her eulogy.

Turning to the choir he said, "Dear hearts, bless us with a song." Intuitively, the mass choir belted out a chorus of, "Walk Around Heaven, All Day Long." A few minutes later, the choir wrapped up the song with a bang and shout. *One more second*, he thought. Zeek paused, his immobile face barely hiding the blues. Realizing he could no longer delay the obvious, the preacher pushed himself to move on. Gazing downward at Broderick Bridges, he lashed out in that legendary, thunderous voice powerful enough to shatter glass.

"The question is, Why! Why is this young man seated before me punctured with bullet holes, his body senselessly broken!"

Glaring three rows back to the reserved pews where twenty of Paterson's finest—all but the guilty parties—sat in judgment, he asked, "My God, why, why, why! Was his mother, a pillar of this community, sprayed with bullets, cut down in the prime of her life!"

In deference to a series of high-pitched and insistent sobs, he paused again, using the breather to collect his thoughts.

“My brothers and sisters, these senseless killings have got to stop! That includes you badged abusers too! The justification for spilling blood has got to be more than just the color of our people’s skin.”

The cops in rows three and four stared on with contorted faces and tightly pursed lips as if they had just pulled down on a tart berry and unexpectedly could not bear the acidity of its juices.

Zeek ended the frontal assault with, “I hear one nobleman saying, ‘Truth crashes to the earth,’ and another saying, ‘No lie can last forever.’ Your life is never in danger when an innocent, unarmed, young black man is running for his life. But oh my insufferable friends, the wrath of God which you ought to fear, may yet be at hand.”

Tarrying there for a beat, almost to the point of provocation, he allowed this last bit of chastisement to marinate. Seconds later, through a faint smile, he said, “I suppose now I am to do what God has called me to do this day and send our precious daughter home in the style befitting her. Please turn in your bibles to 1 Corinthians, 15:52-54.” From a leather-bound, burgundy book, Zeek read:

In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. So when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory.

“I would like to speak from the topic, O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?”

Entering the colossal world of the bereaved, Caldwell realized in that instant he'd seen more bodies restored to the configuration from which they were made; more souls released to the creator

than most people saw sunsets. Nonetheless, he delivered the eulogy of the century cataloging several perspectives about Detective Bridges: dedicated cop, loving daughter, no-nonsense mother, protector of the innocent.

“She was a woman of dedication, faith, great love and resolve. A woman who worked daily to exterminate this city of its drugs and dangerous criminals; a dedication which sadly brings us to this moment.” As an afterthought he declared, “Although, in that final hour, it wasn’t the dope pushers and criminal who betrayed her trust.”

Diverting his eyes back to the Paterson cops, he said, “Well before black lives matter movements she had born the burdens and griefs of *all* lives. Black men, white men, Jews, and Gentiles; Protestants and Catholics.”

Banging the podium he said, “She was our female version of Mary, Martha, Job, Elijah, and Moses all-in-one; tried, tested and proven true.”

Seemingly, those proclamations alone were powerful enough. But the congregants knew such declarations were just the appetizer for the main entrée that was about to come. Having blessed them with inspirational words and solace, Zeek ventured into his classic whooping style of closing.

“My brothers and sisters, I say to you today, Sister Anjanae will rise again! Ain’t no grave gonna hold her body down.”

Several of the deacons on the front row to Zeek’s right rose to their feet. Singing his praises, they shouted a protracted, “Well!”

To Zeek’s left, an organ cranked up providing a cacophony of melodic tunes as a backdrop to his powerful whooping.

“And ah, she’ll wear a star-ry crown, on her head. A looong, white robe, on her back! Have 'a got a witness?”

Some of the sisters in the amen corner hummed excerpts of that old negro spiritual, “Oh my

Lord, Lord, Lord!”

Zeek proclaimed, “As the shrapnel, pierced her dying soul, I saw Sister Bridges turning the other cheek. I heard her saying, ‘Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.’ Have ‘I, got a witness?’”

Spreading those steady, incredibly enormous hands, he proclaimed, “On my way to heaven, I stopped by to tell you today, that I’ve see-e-een, the lightning flash. I’ve heard, the thunder roll! Have ‘I, got a witness?’”

Charged up by ‘halleluiahs’ from the amen corner, he roared in that deep voice that rivaled his colossal size.

“I heard a voice from heaven saying, ‘C’mon unto me all of you who are burdened and heavy laden, and I will give you rest.’

I tell you this day, Sister Bridges is at rest! She is with my father, walking around heaven, all day long!”

A chorus of old-timers in the rear chanted, “My, my, my!”

“And he told me, fear not my faithful son, for Sister Bridges’ name will be written in the Lamb’s Book of Life. Idn’t that right?”

Off to the side, the closed lips of several faithful missionaries moaned, “M-m-m-m-m.” A wave of emotions rippled through the crowd as if the holy ghost itself had been cast upon them. Other church-going sisters clapped their hands over their heads, shouting praises to the Almighty for His promise of eternal salvation; deacons stomped their feet in rhythm with echoing chants that spoke out to remember Detective Anjanae Bridges and a life well lived.

Zeek raised a hand to quiet the fomented crowd, and continued with, “I hear him saying to Sister Bridges, ‘You been faithful over a few things down there. Come up higher, and I’ll make you ruler of many more.’ My good and faithful servant, well done!”

Then, like a bolt from the blue, Zeek pitched himself six inches off the pulpit floor; his robe whipping the air beneath him. He landed in one piece, microphone to mouth, hands clutching hips. Cricking his head to one side, he peered at the cops on rows three and four. Locking those bulging, coffee bean-colored eyes into theirs, he mocked, “O Death! Where is thy sting! O grave, where is thy victory!”

Outside, a strapping black cop dressed in his form-fitting Class-A black and gold uniform, played Taps from a bugle tightly pressed to his lips. Though it was rumored to be a tune of much peace and tranquility, to Broderick, the strains were melancholic, wanting of much rest and serenity. While the echoes did linger awhile, the veracity that this was Broderick and his mother’s final face-to-face encounter, resonated more.

Splintering across his sad, angry, vengeful mind was sudden certainties. She was no longer a stiff lying in a morgue across town; or a body resting in wait in a funeral home. Her lavish, closed-lid casket having been rolled away, she was fading into a memory, soon to be buried six feet underground, under 750 pounds of dirt. The void he had resisted for days was now, permanently at hand.

Following *Taps* was a gun salute. Broderick jumped at the sound of the rifles’ three-volley tribute. Around him, the reactionary faces of people, many of whom he didn’t even know, were drenched with tears and distraught with pain. Reading his varying expressions, the guilt-ridden thoughts cycling through his mind seemed palpable.

Broderick gazed at the tombstone marking Detective Anjanae Bridges’ birth and death dates, March 7, 1969—July 4, 2014. Sitting there with hands clasped together in his lap, guilt-laden thoughts consumed him. Believing that it was crooked cops responsible for his mother’s death and not himself, was insufferable.

Her grave was dug near a road that stretched the entire length of the cemetery. From the corners of his eyes, he saw the black sedan easing up, stopping. A few seconds later, the rear car door opened. A man in Class-A police uniform exited. Minutes later, Max Judah Kane stood off in the distance like an imposter surveilling the somber scene, twirling a burnt orange colored yarn through his fingers, as if in vindication. At first, there was notable gloating; a tantalizing sneer on his lips; a taunting style of intimidation in his swagger.

Then, the paradigm shifted, and it seemed as if a paranormal force was guiding the way, wiping that shit-eating grin off of Kane's face. Swiftly, Broderick Bridges was extrapolated from his desolate scene and jettisoned into the cops' iniquitous world. By chains, Bridges had been securely bound, hand and feet, to a Poplar tree; a haughty noose high above his head; his mind wracked with toil and somber thoughts.

The sound was muted and everything around them was dreadfully still. Eerily quiet, the moment seemed as if they were dug deep into a soundproof lair, as out of touch with reality as the dead stiff's all around them. Above their heads, the sun was blotted out from the sky, like a fleet of dark clouds had descended to cast a blanket of despair.

In a fraction of a second, Kane was upon him. Unclasping his shackles, his ulterior motive palpable. In a voice like hollow wind in a cave, Kane commanded, "Now show me where they laid her to rest."

"Rest?" Bridges retorted. "How could anyone murdered with such savagery, rest?"

Kane silently pulverized him with fire inflamed eyes and a gun pointed to his head. Cowering, Broderick flinched, then obeyed. Slo-walking several yards northward, he said "It's over there," pointing northeast to a tidy looking grave marked by a granite tombstone.

Kane barked his next orders with a venomous rage, "Now go! Crawl back over to that tree

and chain yourself, like the pathetic, pitiful animal you are.” His eyes narrowed to slits as he watched the dismissed kid obey, slinking away in disgrace. Having reclaimed his shackled position, Broderick’s eyes never left the cop who was now standing, head bowed over his dead mother’s grave.

After he had been standing for a while, Kane’s lips started moving; his hands gesturing. He was mumbling something to the ground below him. His voice grew louder, more defined, more coherent as he berated Anjanae Bridges. Violently, the grave below him shook in response; the intensity synonymous with a low-grade earthquake.

In a feeble attempt to rescue her, Bridge's body wrenched frantically at the chains but securely shackled, his hands and feet would not move.

Then, almost suddenly, a barrage of reactions rifled through his adversary; Kane’s body went into a shiver, viciously shaking like a violent windstorm was tearing through him. Minutes later, a calmness settled upon his riled spirit. Returning to their normal state, his eyes lost its satanic glow; his body returned to its statuesque form.

In a covertly triumphant voice he taunted, “One down, one to go. Don’t you worry your pretty little head none,” he reassured a dead Anjanae Bridges.

“I intend to finish the job. Your wimpy little boy will be joining you soon. That, you can count on.”

Broderick’s remained in this translucent state until finally realizing it was Dr. Ezequiel Caldwell, calling his name.

Chapter 12. Arc of Justice

The grisly murder trial of former police officer Max Judah Kane in the death of Detective Anjanae Bridges, had gripped Patterson New Jersey in a vice of rampant anticipation. Suspensefully, a grand jury voted 12-2 to indict. The looming presence of presiding judge, Ethan Spencer from Walterboro SC, emanated through the courthouse like a thunderbolt, his dark skin contrasting glaringly with his cold and calculating demeanor, as did his anti-black persecution of his own race.

The day of the trial, a prosecution team led by Passaic County Prosecutor Shealynn Clemencia Townsend, and her army of assistant district attorneys - Nakala Tate Roberson, Weiss Strain, and Quint Moriarty - began putting on the state's case against Max Judah Kane.

The prosecution claimed Kane maliciously and unjustifiably pursued Detective Anjanae Bridge's son, Broderick Bridges, for 15 minutes, alleging he was a suspect in a liquor store robbery. According to the prosecution, Kane was motivated by revenge; specifically, the murder of his daughter Jada Kane two years prior by a black drug dealer, Cevonté Anthony.

Allegedly, Kane shot Detective Anjanae Bridges, who having heard the call over the police scanner, had arrived on scene outside her home minutes earlier to protect her son. And shot her without warning, despite his awareness that Anjanae Bridges was a law enforcement officer, and despite her attempting to retrieve her badge from her waistband. In her opening statement, ADA Nakala Tate Roberson, set out to paint a damning portrait of Kane as a deeply disturbed and unsympathetic character on a mission to kill.

"The defendant, Max Judah Kane, crossed the line," she said choking back emotions, "from a cop who enforces the law to a renegade who broke the law."

Roberson had strolled as she spoke, her step, the perfect poetry; the bitterness in her voice, strikingly clear.

"This man," she continued, "disrupted effective negotiations between Detective Anjanae

Bridges and Officer Harden Jackson, and did so with malicious intentions.”

Roberson prowled the courtroom with a series of steely-eyed glares and expansive hand gestures, punctuating every point with a dramatic hip swivel. Her words alone were not enough to grab the attention of the jury, so she relied on her pointed body language that at times froze her opponents in place.

“He invoked his own brand of justice out there, needlessly firing a total of four fatal rounds into that esteemed detective’s body.”

The defense team consisted of John Del Vecchio, and co-counsels Jeff Vanderheyden and Mary Jo Kellogg. Del Vecchio, was the brash, arrogant, pompous, loose cannon attorney leading the charge; Kellogg, the former Marine JAG Corps lawyer who was as straight as an arrow; Vanderheyden, the snappish, troublemaking weasel of an attorney. The defense insisted that Detective Bridges was reaching for her gun which she intended to use; that Kane and his fellow officer’s life was in jeopardy, and a split second decision to protect themselves was inevitable. The defense had called experts on lethal use of force, Mr. Matteo Buckridge, and two other witnesses: Officer Hardin Jackson, the Carl Otis Winslow look-a-like, and Lieutenant Roger Craft, to sully Detective Bridges name.

Earlier on in the trial, Spencer denied a change of venue but sneakily allowed a bench warrant, a move which many believe was more favorable to Kane. In a rare move mid-trial, Spencer tipped his hands, chastising Townsend for putting him in a compromising spot by not perusing a lesser charge of felonious assault and left the subtle impression, that the trial would be unfavorable to the prosecution. After a great deal of fancy lawyering on both sides, explosive show of force, episodes of animated and outlandish displays by the defendant, twists, turns, and smoking guns, and betrayals at its highest form, Judge Ethan Spencer was prepared to render his verdict.

Max Judah Kane sat at a table with Del Vecchio, Vanderhaven, and Kellogg seated on his

right side. On his left was a newcomer, a bearded, black attorney, who had never been present for any of the trial proceedings. Possibly, he was there as the defense's prop. For a feigned show of black and white solidarity. Perhaps damage control to douse the flames of fury that would follow a verdict unfavorable to a black community. Perchance, the thinking was that news footage of his black face next to white litigators and their vindicated cop would stem the turbulent tides.

At opportune times during the summation, Kane looked desperately at Del Vecchio for moral support. Del Vecchio returned an ill-informed look, one that conveyed an expression that he was spent, and his tank was on "E." Contrastingly, Kane gave the black attorney that, 'You know this ain't personal right' look which preceded a perceptible expression of scrutiny. As if alerting the solemn-looking man in his grey Sunday best and striped, blue tie, not to get too close, Kane scooted closer to Del Vecchio.

With courtroom cameras snapping away, Spencer began reading from the last ten pages of his thirty-five-page script, as defiant and resolute as ever.

"At the beginning of this trial, I stated that I would not unjustly sacrifice this police officer if the evidence did not prove that he knowingly and intentionally used deadly force in a situation where there was no threat of harm or loss of his life."

Purposefully, Spencer sat there a second, dreary and prophetic allowing the typical exploits of courtroom justice to take hold. Mighty was the crown of the courtroom authoritarian seated high, and looking low. Heavy was the hand that was about to reign down justice like he was some unfailable, unflinching vindicator or omnipotent Yahweh. Continuing, he pronounced, "I also stressed that if evidence proved beyond a reasonable doubt that the defendant abandoned his oath, I'd have no other choice but to honor mine."

Stealing another breather, Spencer glared at Kane with unwavering intensity; a blinding stare

that penetrated Kane's soul like a switch blade. Kane's heart pounded erratically in his chest, each beat like a hammer against his rib cage. As the possibility of prison time came closer, the thought of ruthless inmates clutching sharpened shivs, went traipsing across his mind.

"A number of weeks were spent examining every aspect of this case. From the time before and after Officer Kane took a position, fired four shots, and the three seconds in between that it took other officers to begin firing," Spencer said.

He apprised the court that the evidence in the case had proven several things leading to the conclusions upon which his verdict was based. The courtroom took on its own pulsating beat after this proclamation before dissipating into a blending austerity of hushed, monotonous, rhythmic sounds. With this last, the judge imparted his audience with another defiant, implacable stare before stating, "Not all officers were convinced that the threat had been neutralized. Six officers, albeit, three seconds later, also fired deadly shots."

Noticing Townsend's unease, Spencer's voice became sharp and furtive. His ax to grind, glinting in the dim light, shone with an eerie promise of dire retribution, albeit, a misguided payback for a tumultuous childhood. His mind backtracked to those taunting black boys who made his life hell.

Mason and Naomi Spencer's smart choices made Ethan and his brother Christopher's lives more comfortable, which made Ethan a target for oppressed black kids who intuited that the only way to quiet their internal discord was to strike out at some well-to-do kid. On one occasion, Ethan ventured across the tracks and was physically and mentally obliterated by boys his age and color. The most common attacks were, "Hey you Uncle Tom white trash, why don't you carry yo' Mulato-looking ass back to yo'side of town!"

Then came the personal strikes, "Hey man, that lil' fucka's wearin' braces."

"You dint know man, that bucktooth, punk bitch still sucks his thumb."

“Man, I wonder what else he sucks?” One of the bigger boys had asked, then snickered as he drag Ethan by his collar to a more secluded place to dispel any doubts as to his extraordinary conjectures.

Only thing saved Ethan's little high-yellow behind, was a cop who popped up out of nowhere and spoiled the fun.

Having briefly relived those perilous moments, Spencer returned to the trial at hand. He spoke fervently capitulating that, “Kane was in an unfamiliar situation, one that would have been tough for officers with far more experience to comprehend.”

Spencer held up at the sight of Assistant ADA Roberson shifting around in her seat, her lips contorted, her eyes daring him to take that forbidden path. Townsend looked on resentful that the judge was exuding that pompous air of, ‘I know something you don’t.’

Judge Spencer stressed that “It was conceivable Kane believed a woman, now known as a fellow police officer, was reaching for her weapon.”

Adlibbing, he threw in his two cents about how a dangerous, fomenting crowd added to the distraction and reasoned, “This is the veracity of the situation Kane was presented with.”

Though relieved by the promising launch, neither Kane nor Del Vecchio et. al., would dare mistake these utterances as a sign a not guilty verdict was on the horizon. On the contrary, the accused and his defense counsel seemed evenly rattled that Judges had a cunning way of scattering rose petals amidst a bed of thorns.

“Kane did not fire prematurely at a person who was clearly unarmed. This was not someone walking or running away,” said Spencer.

More rose petals floated from the robed dictator’s throne, landing at Kane’s feet. In response, Kane performed the catholic gesture of reverence and respect: a cross over his heart, fingers striding right, left, up, down, right again, then center. Having allowed the accused his moment of Godly

homage, Spencer moved on dismissively.

“The four shots were justified based on Kane's belief that Detective Bridges had a gun and was likely reaching for that gun.”

In a teacher-like tone he declared, “Undeniably, a court is the place to find truth and justice. But to understand what Kane was thinking in that tense moment, the courtroom is not the best setting. I dare say, no one can put themselves in his shoes.”

With this last, Spencer sat for a spell, perusing his script for more ammo. Flipping pages about, he found his sweet spot and continued his spiel. “I cannot find cause to believe that Max Kane alone fired the fatal shots that killed Anjanae Bridges. I also did not have supportive evidence that Officer Kane was unjustified in believing his life was in danger.”

At times clutching his hands, at times steepling them; at times reading from his documents, at times improvising, Spencer reiterated, “Kane fired lethal shots at Anjanae Bridges, but other officers did as well.”

Anticipating the outcome, and seeing it play itself out in real time, was a different animal for Chief Prosecutor Shealynn Townsend. The after-effects were synonymous with the piercing of a heart, bludgeoning with a nail-studded billy club, or a hatchet to the head. Neither one was any less catastrophic than the other. Hard to pick her poison! Bracing herself for shock, Townsend set upright, straight-faced, slowed her breathing almost to the point of cessation. *And here it comes*, she thought, fortifying herself for the tsunami that would wipe her away.

“I find that the state did not prove beyond a reasonable doubt that Max Judah Kane knowingly caused the death of Anjanae Bridges and injuries to her son, Broderick Bridges.”

In warfare, fanatics were known to dip their bullets in poison. Though not as lethal, American soldiers copied the scheme during the Iraqi war. Scud missiles were engraved with, *This is for making*

us miss Game of Thrones. For the more spiteful and determined warriors, it was not enough to kill. Death had to be evil and treacherous and tainted with an underlying message. Spencer's war zone was seemingly no different. It was not enough to thrust the knife in deep. The blade had to be purposefully tainted with toxin and likewise thrust, turned, and twisted with penetrating force. To fortify the effect, and leave jagged edges. So, for future reference, Townsend, and the likes of her, would know their place. Know what it was like to be spanked. Think twice about testing his resolve or calling his bluff. And with this fortification firmly in place, the judge stared spitefully in Townsend's direction, careful not to let his gaze slip.

"The state elected to forego pursuit of the lesser charge of Felonious Assault. But even if it had opted for that lesser charge, it likewise would have proven to be a lost cause," Spencer stated.

Townsend stayed her preferred volcanic eruption to this undercut and sat there clamped to her chair with a thinly veiled smile. Earlier in his chambers, the conniving, underhanded, cutthroat weasel had raked her over the coals, vehemently scolding her for NOT pursuing a felonious assault charge. Knowing in the end, she would not prevail even with that offense. The tainted blade had been thrust, turned, and twisted with penetrable force. She had been dutifully spanked!

"Max Kane," Spencer continued, "would likewise be legally excused from liability in a Felonious Assault charge. Constitutionally, Officer Kane caused harm to victims to end an objectively reasonable perception that his and other officer's lives were in danger."

Smiling mischievously, the Judas impersonator seemed to relish in his blatant underhandedness, his poisonous elixir, having been dispatched.

"I cannot confidently deduce that it was Kane's shots that killed Detective Bridges, since six other officers were shooting in unison," said Spencer. Continuing, he conveyed that the other officers were yet to be tried though they also took aim and fired at Anjanae Bridges.

"Therefore, it was constitutionally reasonable, under Supreme Court precedents for Kane to

think that Anjanae Bridges posed a threat to him and to other officers.”

The taunting warrior-king and newly crowned chess champion went in for the kill with, “The defendant, Max Judah Kane, is hereby found, not guilty!”

Spencer inclined his head in Kane’s direction. With an apologetic look, he said, “Sir, you are free to go.”

Out of nowhere, Broderick appeared, looking apathetic, numb to the fact that history had just repeated itself. Indifferent that the arc of justice had not been bent in his or his mother’s favor. But what followed was a peculiarly calm serenity. Broderick seemed a man on a mission with an ace up his sleeve. Like there was still an ax to grind or another branch of justice—likely street justice—to be commissioned. Townsend wondered about his strange composure. Was it resolve or silent fury; acceptance or a display of intended reprisal?

As an afterthought, the embattled litigator resigned herself to the fact that hurt and disappointment manifested itself in many different and unspeakable ways. With any luck, Detective Anjanae Bridge’s sole-surviving son would move on with life, accept the realism that the justice system was not perfect, maybe even, conveniently configured differently for Black people. Townsend knew she had to believe in the kid’s good side conquering his retaliatory side. Believing the alternative came with grave consequences. A quaint reality that she selfishly, prejudicially would not probe or unravel threads. Nor forewarn the newly acquitted of an endangered aftermath. A truth that stemmed from her own unsavory beliefs and unchecked desires. That hereafter, should Black people seek to avenge Anjanae Bridges’ death, Max Kane would get exactly what he deserved. His fate would result in the same or worst payback than the one he had so callously meted out. Whatever the case, Broderick Bridges hugged her tightly. Pulling Nakala Tate Roberson in, he said, “Y’all put up one hell of a fight. But I knew in my heart, those bastards weren’t gonna budge.”

Chapter 13. Vengeance is Mine

Sometime amid trial the five man hit squad had convened. Under the cover of darkness, and buckets of slanted raindrops hurtling down like tiny daggers, a preliminary meeting was held on the outskirts of Paterson at an untenanted location. Terryl Little had set the whole thing up and got the word out to all the players concerning date, time, and locale. The purpose was known but the agenda sketchy, as was Terryl's vague directions, which provided no physical address:

Drive twenty miles out Route Three, turn left in front of the billboard with the skinhead raising his mighty swastika. Head North about fifteen more miles; at the General Robert E. Lee statute, hang a left, drive three more miles and make a sharp right turn. After hitting the dip in the road, slow down. Kill the lights.

An inch more, and the 3-car convoy would have rammed the one-story establishment which abruptly surfaced like a barnacled ship emerging out of a blue, foggy mist. The shabby, one-story building was an old, abandoned blues nightclub. Judging by the county papers plastered to the front door, the place had long ago been condemned. It was as if it had been abandoned in the middle of a song, leaving behind nothing but echoes and memories.

Once inside, Little ran his hands along the walls to orient himself in the dark. Having acquired a sense of direction, he flipped a switch and the room came to life. The place was unsightly: windows covered by a deep, yellow film, and drab, peeling paint on the walls. In its relic state, the club's only signs of life emitted from flickering lights, escorted by the sound of sparks crackling from the overhead wires, intermittently buzzing like swarms of angry bees. Fused in were the pungent odors of something decomposed and the scent of plastic burnt from metal, the amalgamated pungency, now amplified a thousand-fold.

Tank griped, "Yo brotha what the fuck! Smells like shit in here Terrel! Like something done up and died!" Spinning his index finger in the air, he pleaded, "My dude! Open a window! Fuckin' forreal!"

Terrel Little obliged. Striding his beanpole frame through the room to two of the closest windows, he slid his fingers under the latches. Two panes of glass swung open, letting in a gust of noxious air, filling the room with a miasma of pollution and decay. With it, rolled in a dirty uneasiness tinged with something else, an unpleasant sensation that weighed down upon the five of them like that mark of fatalism that Niggahs faced every day in their fight to persevere.

In the room's center, five metal chairs were situated in a circle hovering over a grey cemented dance floor baring the stains of whatever debris slid from the bottom of patron's shoes onto its surface. As an afterthought, the five partners in crime—Terrel Little, his acquaintance, Enforcer, Bridges, Tank, and Trent—greeted each other with soul shakes, fist bumps, and side hugs before getting down to business.

The establishment was not what you would call cozy but seemed suitable for strategizing the takedown of a murderous cop. Each man copped a squat in one of the scarred, gray chairs. It was Enforcer, the armed, ominous-looking brother, who claimed to have ties to the Panthers, who spoke first. Shifting the AK47 strapped to his right shoulder he said, "As long as the right thing is done, there is no reason for us to seek retribution. But we all know, we could spend an eternity waiting for the right thing to be done."

"Word," Trent replied in agreement.

"But if the right thing is not done and this pig walks, we must act," Enforcer avowed quite forcefully.

"What exactly is the *right thing*?" Broderick asked.

Tank chimed in then with, "Some things are better left unsaid or better spoken of in generalities Broderick."

Remembering the last time Tank advised him about remaining in the dark, Broderick stared

his friend down skeptically, before asking, “Then why exactly am I here?”

Bridges then gave Terrel Little a scowling look. Knowingly, Little kept his trap shut and surreptitiously looked away. It was because of his bad deeds, two-plus years ago, that Bridges spent a minute longer in Paterson County lockup than he should have. But Little had made amends, his coming clean helped. His and Tank’s two-page letter admitting that Bridges was an innocent, uninformed, nonparticipant in the 2012 shakedown of the two victims—Varnan and Osheena Porter—had vindicated Broderick. Until now, they had thought all had been forgiven.

Enforcer's gaze hardened as he replied to Broderick, matter-of-factly with, “Because you believe as most of Paterson’s Black people do, that someone has to answer for your mother’s death.”

Sighing, Broderick said, “Guess I can’t deny that, it is my truth.” As an afterthought, he said, “But just don’t ask me to pull no damn trigger. Ya’ heard me? I ain't built for that shit!”

Roguishly laughing, Enforcer, the man who refused to give a real name said, “No worries my brother. We got that end covered.”

“How about a rundown of the plan,” Trent intervened, all too anxious to find justice for the woman who had stabilized him beyond measure.

Anjanae had no doubt begun restoring Trent's bad image of himself while fostering that emotional, bond he desperately craved, yearned; needed in order to mend. A debt of gratitude was owed; albeit, Trent never imagined repaying it in this way. Before their entanglement or as Anjanae would put it – ‘This little whatchamacallit’ - ten years in the slammer and too many days in the hole, had worn him away until he felt stuck in an endless loop. Beaten down to nothing; chiseled away until he was a mere husk of himself.

Enforcer responded, “We believe Kane’s contact information will be unintentionally publicized at some point. Just like they leaked the address and phone number of that murderous, sadistic fool, Jordie Zimmerit who killed Trey Martinson. If not, we have hackers on standby to

retrieve the intel.”

Treating this like some CIA operative, Enforcer divulged his organization’s - The Black Prophets - secret ties with an infamous hacker group who called themselves, “The Cloner’s.” The Cloner’s being the clandestine, cloak-and-dagger organization that had existed without a trace for the past fifteen years. The unidentified masterminds of The Cloner’s were on “America’s Most Wanted” list with rewards reaching the sum of twenty million dollars. Hacking into systems, leaking codes, revealing the most embarrassing information, was The Cloners claim to fame.

On a few or more occasions, The Cloners had reached out to The Black Prophets through untraceable channels to offer their services. They had proven fruitful in fleshing out the phone numbers, addresses, and corrupt deeds of government officials, racists and terrorists cells, and dirty cops cloaking themselves in hateful deceit by way of a badge.

Enforcer announced, “A week after all the protesting, rioting, and looting has died down, we will capture Kane and bring him here.”

“And then what?” Broderick asked.

“A bullet to the head; maybe a shot to the heart; and his ass hog-tied and dumped into the Passaic River.” Enforcer said matter-of-factly.

“Just like that, huh?” Broderick debated.

“Just that simple,” Enforcer confirmed.

Tank, Trent, and Little nodded their heads in agreement and gave Enforcer a “game-on” look.

Trent said, “And don’t forget the cinderblocks. We don’t need his bloated ass surfacing anytime too soon. Chloroform to knock his ass out and, ropes, zip ties, and the plastic tarp too.”

Enforcer laughed that evil, throaty laugh and said, “No doubt my brother. No doubt.”

For Broderick, the initial thought of retaliation was palatable. An eye for an eye; a tooth for

a tooth. But on second thought, he wondered if it wasn't just a brief, sweet elixir to his palate that would eventually melt away when actually faced with the undertaking. And there was that damning second-guessing; meaning, was it something he could be a party to, even if he wasn't expected to pull the trigger. Even if he wanted that trifling, no good bastard to suffer in misery and would lose no sleep if he was dropped into a vat of acid or hit by a Megabus!

But witnessing his mother succumb to death; the life evaporating from her sole; feeling her plummet to the pavement, albeit, on top of him was disturbing enough. Could he stomach such an ordeal all over again, so soon, even if this time it was Anjanae's ruthless killer who bit the dust? Though he knew their hearts were in the right place, his mother's avengers were talking about death and murder like killing was a sport; ordering up death like an item from a menu.

"I don't know man. Death is final. Couldn't we just ruff him up a little; strap a rope around his ankles; drag him through the streets of Patterson. Put the fear of God in him, maybe?"

Enforcer said, "You right son. Death *is* final. As such, you can never get your mother back. Which is why that muthafucka's punishment must fit his crime!"

Tank then snapped, his fists clinched. His body shook and quivered like it was in a sifter, and veins bulged and pumped fire through every inch of him, as though it had been him who had been chopped apart by Kane's relentless lead. Flinging his words at Broderick like stones Tank chastised, "Peep this Broderick! Look at you with that limp. Your body's all jacked up – a hot mess of busted flesh and broken bones. And yo spirit? Crushed! Ain't nothin' like what it used to be. They said it could be up to a year before you start walking right again Broderick. And you mean to tell me, that motherfucker just waltzin' around like nothin' ever happened - not a hair out of place! What kind of sick shit is that Broderick?"

Later that night, Max Judah Kane who had easily made bail, courtesy of unions and supporter

donations, was on Conservatives' Nightly Talks blabbing his mouth. Staring straight into the camera Kane broadcasted, "Just as that thug killed my Jada, I had to believe that the shooting of Detective Anjanae Bridges was a part of some divine plan."

One of the show's hosts, a conservative right-wing pundit named Shannon Holms asked, "Well, do you have any regrets or remorse? After all, she had a son."

"And I had a daughter!" Kane snapped. "Look, I am in no position to question The Maker. And let's not forget, her son was no saint. He also has blood on his hands. Maybe the wrong hand was cut off, but so be it!"

Walking back his statements, Kane said as an afterthought, "So, neither me nor my partners were gunning for Detective Bridges. Just wanted to talk to her son. She got caught in the crossfire. All's required is for them to respect the law. Recognize that we have the power to bring babies into the world or take them out of it. All they gotta do is obey cop's commands at all times. Don't get sassy, don't resist, don't go on about their rights being trampled on. But all those motherfuckers know is confrontation. That's it!"

After pacing the floor, punching helplessly at thin air, and busting snot, Bridges dried the tears pooling in the rims of his eyes. Picking up the phone, he dialed the number to Terrel Little. Animated, Little picked up on the first ring and greeted him with, "What you know good homie?"

In the background Broderick could hear Little's rap tunes blaring, 'busting some shots off, dustin' some cops off.' An aggressive mix of pounding drums, edgy synthesizers reverberated through Broderick's cellphone. The lyrics epitomized angry taunting, as though they were taken straight from Jasper Aldridge's country tunes, "Pull That Ish in our Country Town," growling out words of, 'Guess how far ya get down yonder roads. Get out of bounds, overstep the mark, lickety-split, we got somethin' to put an end to your start.'

"Hey Little," Broderick said eagerly, "if this bastard gets off, I'm all in!"

“My Niggah!” Little happily responded.

“And tell Enforcer, I might require a little 101 and target practice firing that AK47 but I am ready to do what needs to be done!”

“Consider it done my brotha! Consider it done!”

Chapter 14. Civil Unrest

A long and leanly built African American brother with a menacing glare from bulging brown eyes broadcasted, “We warned ’em, didn’t we? Said, ‘If that racist cop walks, Paterson will burn.’”

The scrawny young homeboy to his left, sporting an Afro that was neatly parted down the middle, cut in with, “Well, he walked!” He continue his boasting in a raw voice and face set in a perpetual half-smile, “And damn if Paterson ain’t on fire!”

Near Jasper and 5th, perplexed cops behind translucent shields and helmets became lost in a swirl of a growing mob of rioters; pulled, pushed, and slammed into the barrier that was, for the moment, a wall. Further south, Black business owners stood outside their establishments hammering cardboard signs reading: ‘Black-owned and Operated!’ Copycat Korean and Japanese storeowners did likewise.

“Just look at ’em over there trying to mark their doors with the blood of the lamb; thinking this shit will bypass them,” a black woman waving her broomstick shouted.

Echoing her taunting, a brother from a few feet away hollered, “Hell naw dawg! Don’t try to cozy up to us now. Don’t you remember? You hate our black asses too!”

Brotherman’s fury was spat at Seong Jin, a black-hating Korean corner store proprietor who had the nerve to wrongly drop dime on him for pocketing an mp3 player the week prior. Now all of a sudden, Jin wanted to ‘keep it real’, talk that talk, like they were tight. As if he’d ever truly forget the straight-up diss. Besides, he was no fool. Jin’s sudden ‘down with the brown’ would last right up until his precious little bodega needed no more protection from these rowdy-ass ‘niggahs.’

The next morning Governor Edwin Doyle and Mayor DeVonte Dorsey boarded a helicopter to appraise the carnage. Doyle strained his eyes to look; to see firsthand how the destructive night had camouflaged a ravenous beast—leaving in its wake the fury; the gravitas; the burnt rubble of a city in ruin.

Doyle's rage surged through his veins like a wildfire fueled by his witnessing of the smoldering ashes of Paterson's inner city. His stomach churned with contempt for the thugs who had brought it to its knees, leaving nothing but ruin behind. Every cord in his body drew taut and his face contorted in intolerance as he summoned every vile word that his dearly departed mother would detest. Knowing that airing such X-rated and anti-black expletives in the presence of the city's first black mayor might not go over well, he had to grit his teeth, begrudgingly suppressing the urge to unleash.

On the city's westside, homes had been destroyed, mom-and-pop shops burnt to a crisp; owners walking around in circles; hands up, and destitute. Eastwardly, warehouses were reduced to rubble; CVS's, Starbucks, Wendy's, and Home Depots all disintegrated to ash. In spite of it all, mouthy law enforcement officials remained arrogant; on national T.V., preaching that same old Regan-era law and order crap. Oblivious to the cost of denying Black people what was rightfully theirs. Equal justice under the law!

Later in the day, Doyle dispatched the national guard. As night set in, tanks rolled down Paterson's streets. The city resembled a warzone—Blackhawk helicopters overhead; boots on the ground. Within minutes, alleys and streets were blanketed with thick curtains of smoke. Martial law was in play!

At 8 PM, Broderick was begged for his assistance in calming the angry crowd. Police Chief Darren Foster had phoned him, desperate and out of touch. A shallow voice in the background sounded like Dorsey coaching him along. For all the good that did. It also didn't help Foster's cause, launching into his tirade in a quasi-accusatory manner. To Broderick's ears, the chastising came off like a self-serving lame-duck official trying rashly to defuse a powder keg, while laying guilt and blame at his feet.

“Son, people are going to get hurt, some may even die. I fear Black people will suffer the brunt of it all. I cannot imagine you'd want that on your conscious.”

Foster exhaled a long, slow breath. Then, in a loud, melodramatic voice, delivered his best performance of groveling and begging.

“It's getting out of hand. So I'm pleading with you to come out and address this angry mob. Being the deace's son, I believe you would have the greatest impact. You at least owe us that much.”

“Owe us? Look man, I don't owe ya'll shit! Ya heard me? This was ya'lls fuckup! Not mine!”

In a voice loud enough to awaken the dead, he raged on, “You're the ones who failed to keep your trashy-ass, niggah-hatin' cop on a leash!”

Trying to constrain himself, Broderick rubbed a hand down the side of his face. Drew in a deep breath. Exhaled! But the ensuing tongue lashings that came after, were no less peppered with unbridled angst.

“Look here bruh, I know my own mind, so don't even fuckin' try to play games or think you can hustle me with guilt trips!”

“Son, you've got it all wrong. Especially, if you think I'd try to feed you bullshit at a time like this.”

“Then I'll tell you what Chief. Here's a little piece of advice. You really don't want me out there saying shit I don't believe. Cuz instead of pleading for calm, my black-ass would be screaming the loudest, 'Let's burn this motherfucka to the ground!’”

“Is that what she would want son? Your mother was a good and decent cop. Is that how you'd want to carry on her legacy?”

“Oh *now*, she is a 'good and decent cop,'” Broderick parroted, “before, she was just a dirty-ass cop. Flashing her ten-inch semi-automatic Uzi. Lookin' to bust'a cap in some cop's ass.”

“Son, I did not say that! But hey, that's all behind us now. We must press forward. Deal with the situation at hand.”

Broderick retorted, “Then deal with it Goddamn it! Leave my ass out of it!”

As Broderick grasped the depth of Foster’s betrayal, pictured the “token brother” adorned in his prescribed costume, and all its regalia, a fuming rage boiled up inside him. A rage so powerful it felt as though his body was about to detonate. He was engulfed by a searing hatred towards this race-traitor who could only bring himself to identify with his own kind when convenient or advantageous. Apart from that, Black people's names were unsafe in his mouth.

In that instant, Broderick realized that unfamiliar side of himself, a revelation that catapulted him to unknown depths. Conceivably, it was the moment, maybe it was his yet mourning the dead, or feasibly his thorn in the side. Whatever it was, loathing Foster came with a strange combination of sweet satisfaction and fear. Satisfaction that it was so much to his liking. Fear, that never had a thing of such magnitude, so fierce and fearless, overtaken every inch of his being, powerful enough to make him forget all conventional boundaries of decency and morality.

“*Good cop*’, ‘*legacy*’. Where’d all that get her? Dead I guess!”

There was an impregnable silence on the other end of the line, more unintelligible background chitchat, then an abrupt, “We’ll be in touch.”

More seconds ticked by. The line went dead.

Failing to guilt trip Broderick about his civic duties, Foster and Dorsey punted to Reverend Ezekiel Caldwell. Foster was still too amped. This time it was Mayor Dorsey pleading the case. The call came in at 8:45 PM in the evening. In that slow, deep, bassy voice the reverend answered, “Hello. This is Zeek.”

“Hello Rev, DelVonte Dorsey here. Calling in a favor.”

“Great God Almighty! Mayor DelVonte Dorsey! Mustbe a massive meteorite storm headed our way. Like the one that hit Sodom and Gomorrah! Ain't seen yo' behind in church in many 'a days now. Fact is, I believe the last time was when you needed votes?”

“Well, ah-ah-ah, you know how it is Rev. Ah, thangs get busy runnin' a city that never sleeps.”

Zeek badgered, “Look boy! We ain't in Vegas or New Orleans! And, ah-ah-ah, is you sayin' you too busy for the Lord?”

“No, now, I ain't sayin' nothin' like that, “ Dorsey said, trying hard not to trip over his words

“Alright then. Cause I know you ain't forgot who help put your butt in that seat!”

“You and the Lord?”

“Don't forget the congregation. They had a hand in it too.”

“Yes, most definitely. It's just that these little thugs are tearing this city apart. The Gov is being backed into a corner. And you know how stuff rolls downhill.”

“Boy you ought to be ashamed of yo'self! You, of all people fixing yo' mouth to call somebody's child a thug. You remember that scrawny, little rascal, racing that dang-on dirt bike all over the place, terrorizing the hood? Always into something. Yeah that was you.”

Dorsey knew his ass was in a caboose. Having to play along with the Heathcliff Huxtable impersonator to get what he needed.

Faking that patronizing laugh he said, “Wasn't I though?”

Scenting the urgency of the matter, Zeek cut to the chase. “How can I be of help to you, sir?”

“Thing is Reverend, it's up to you and me to peaceablize the situation. Find a way out of this mess.”

“*Peaceablize?* Whoa! Wait! Back that dawg up son! How's this suddenly my problem?”

“They've damn near done destroyed an entire city Rev! Looting, pillaging, firebombing black

churches; creating more ugliness than Watts, LA, and Ferguson combined. You are our last hope! The Gov has authorized lethal force. Shoot first, ask questions later!”

Zeek wanted to ask, ‘Well ain’t that the way it always is when it comes to cops killing niggahs?’ Instead, he sighed a sigh of weightiness. Then came that benevolent groan.

“Alright then son, well you know everything I do has to be done out of prayer. Let me get back to you in the morning.”

“Nuh-uh, see Rev, we need you now! The meeting is tonight, at 9:30 PM in downtown Patterson.”

Zeek peered out his study's window to the street corner across the way. Flashing blue and green lights. Two white cops with pistols drawn on a young, black man (“college kid”). He bowed his head in silent prayer in deference to the boy’s ill-fated conclusions. By the time his eyes flicked open, the cops and the college kid were peaceably parting ways. This was a rarity; a sure sign this was not the time to flinch from the truth.

“Rev, you there?”

“My one and only rule,” Zeek insisted, “is I do and say things my way, or not at all!”

Frantic and desperate, Dorsey agreed.

A half-hour before the 10 PM curfew was about to go into effect, Black people had assembled near the Octavius V. Catto monument, in the heart of downtown Patterson. Many instantly recognized the black faith leader standing at the podium; his feet planted firmly upon a makeshift stage. Although, he looked much leaner in his fedora, tweed jacket, and thick woolen slacks than when he was last seen in his traditional black robe.

Seated behind him, were Foster and Dorsey, sweating intense bullets. One eye on Caldwell, to scrutinize his every word, the other on the crowd, for signs of melee. Zeek grabbed the microphone

from Foster, clutching it tightly in his hands. Pressing it to his lips, he addressed the crowd.

“What you're witnessing here are the cries of the unheard!” He said pausing for a beat.

Directing his gaze to the Catto monument, he let it rest there for a moment before returning his attention to the crowd.

“The story of the hundreds of lives that have converged at this monument is being told. Not in the bronze statue before us. But in the sobs of the motherless. Not in grand eloquence but in the rivers of tears that ripples the air for miles and miles.”

Nodding excitedly, the protesters were bobbing their heads in agreement, enraptured by what they saw and heard. It was obvious that “the Rev” was more than just a man of the cloth — he could chop it up with the best and worst among them, talk to anyone, no matter their social standing. Zeek was well-versed with that instinctive ability to communicate just as well with rulers and royalty as he did with the destitute; switch between formal and street lingo as the situation required. The crowd looked upon him as though he was their prophet Muhammad, or something close. The man just exuded that invincible vibe. That real god-like power, like Moses with his rod and staff. Power both wise and serene.

Then, unexpectedly, with the life force in his eyes, Zeek's words burst forth in bellowing proclamation, “We are people! Our black lives matter! Don’t tell me nothin' about white lives! All lives! Or, Blue lives right now! Their lives aren't being snuffed out; their blood isn't being mopped up; their death tolls aren't setting the population a new high. Least, not nearly to the magnitude of Black people in this community!

No, my brothers and sisters, I’m specifically speaking about Black lives! The ones being orphaned by their mothers! The ones grieving their murdered sons!”

Several black demonstrators began swaying to the humming of “We Shall Overcome” while others shouted, “Black Power!” and “Black Lives Matter!” Numerous anti-black hecklers responded

with their distorted version of “The Battle Hymn of the Republic.” Their rendition morphed into mantras of “White Lives Matter! Blue Lives Matter! All Lives Matter!”

A few in their mix became rowdy, pushing their way towards the stage. Coolly, Zeek raised a hand urging, “Now please, let's keep the peace, my white brothers and sisters! I know this truth cuts like a knife. But it must be told, for the good of *all* mankind!”

Initially, the all-white rabble-rousing bunch put up a fuss, but eventually had no choice but to back down. With a wave of their ringleader's hand they dispersed, leaving behind a heavy cheer in their wake.

“You cannot just kill us dead, time after time and denigrate our resulting dissents!”

Zeek roared on in a voice that boomed out the loudest, “We cannot continue to allow corrupt, bloodthirsty cops to stack our streets with the innocent bodies of unarmed black men. Shoot their mothers in cold blood, as they did Sister Bridges, and expect our tails to remain tucked between our legs!”

In the distance, a shotgun discharged! A building imploded! Sirens blasted! A loud penetrating sound of a window shattered echoed through the air. A tad of panic stirred. Unflinching, Zeek kept it in check, using the explosive sounds to segway into his next line of reasoning.

“But I say to you my black brothers and sisters, remember Martin Luther King! He did not preach ‘burn baby burn,’ he preached ‘earn baby earn!’ “

Though his primary focus was on the preservation of black livelihood; the proliferation of black enterprises, Zeek was cautious not to give White people any more ammunition in their arsenal against Black people.

He preemptively declared, “No longer will our desperate cries be sullied by nationalist-minded law enforcement officials. Who're more concerned about racist monuments and confederate flags than they are about Black people's lives.”

Behind him, Foster and Doyle traded disoriented looks. The discourse sounded too militant. Too divisive. Too Anti-cop. Too resonant of the Man of God stoking fires, and fanning the flames of dissent. At his back, Zeek heard Foster rip into Dorsey, “Did you know this...this radical preacha, was going to demonize law enforcement?”

“Is that what he’s doing? Had no idea,” Dorsey responded. “But truth be told, we are at his mercy. Just give ‘em a chance.”

Zeek eased to the side of the podium; turned himself around to face the police chief. He glared at Foster as if staring into the eyes of a two-headed snake. Then, he winked, nodded, and smiled mischievously at the chief. With fur-frenzied rage, he reclaimed his position at the podium, ready for the gut-punch.

Zeek denounced, “Something is inhumanely wrong when it only takes corrupt cops a matter of seconds to murder innocent black men. And the system, even when led by one of our own so-called black leaders, an eternity to bring them to justice.”

Foster narrowed his gaze, glaring blankly into the empty abyss in front of him. He couldn't help but feel the full brunt of its force reverberate through him. He drew in a deep breath and exhaled knowing the dig was aimed squarely at him. As was the next.

“A system, and it’s so-call black chief, who has the unmitigated gall to demand Black people act like they got good sense. In the wake of yet another brutal, unjustified murder by a sadistic cop. Who, clearly did not act like he had *any* sense.”

This time, Foster was on his feet, fish grease hot; reminiscent of a building about to be engulfed in flames. A fire in his eyes; his puffing and panting, almost audible enough to be heard by the crowd. Unswayed, Zeek issued his final challenge.

“Our cries for racial justice must continue in the face of an insensitive white power structure! Become so loud and clear, it cannot be drown out!

Our cries for equality must be converted into political leverage, forever at the heart of any and all political agendas. So let's stay the course! Be steadfast! Defiant and unmovable! And may the Lord bless and keep you, my dear brothers and sisters.”

A few feet away, loud-mouth, gun-toting Ku Klux Klan scoundrels stood behind cordoned-off barricades. Their lethal stares portended to crush the black resistance if so much as one brown-eyed hooligan crossed the line. Across from them, caustic looks and fomenting chatter from the crowd of Panthers and The Black Prophets , threatened an even stealthier aftermath. A man in a black turtleneck knit shirt and matching colored slacks took to a megaphone blurting out, “White America has spoken! Now it will see and hear our response.”

Staring straight at the chief Ku Klux Klan leader, he announced, “We fear no man! Especially those who hide behind white sheets! In the coming days, we will send a scathing message the likes of which America has never seen.

Painfully delivered, that message will involve former Officer Max Judah Kane.”

Chapter 15. Hours Till Death

He had been left for days sitting in that one stinking spot. Hands zip-tied, feet bound, no concept of where he was. Just, that the drive was painfully cramped and gruelingly long. He remembered being flung into the trunk of a car like cheap luggage, the jarring sensation of a trunk door slamming shut, the opening and closing of car doors. All of which came before the sound of skidding tires; the smell of burnt rubber; the back of the car peeling out of his driveway, fishtailing onto the open road. Before that, a wet cloth had been pressed to his nose, and he recalled the ether-like smell and the wooziness that came after. But it was the butt of the gun that kept him knocked out cold.

Hours later when he came to, he could detect that he was no longer in the trunk of a car. More exactly, he'd been blindfolded, kidnapped, and transported to a hollow-sounding building in the middle of God knows where. His head hurt something fierce and he felt a gooey substance trickling down his face, the texture, and the sulfuric smell of his own warm blood. He rubbed his head against his shoulder hoping to find relief. But relief was an amenity intentionally, and purposefully withheld. Whatever this was, it was not intended to be laid-back; his abductors had no interest in making this ordeal a Shangri-la.

In the hours leading up to this madness, he remembered the chatty voices of several black-sounding men laying out their plan. Once on scene, they were moving things around, staging something depraved, likely his death. Soon after, they departed, leaving no instructions about the ensuing agenda. Now, they were back.

His only concept of time was the long hours of brightness stretching into the protracted hours of darkness seeping through the threads of the blindfold around his head. There was no burnt orange yarn from Jada's knit shirt to twirl around his fingers; no sniffing of strands to remind him she'd always be there.

He had pissed and soiled his trousers, dry-heaved violently, then drifted back off to sleep in his own stench. They had returned to resume the torture. The one called Enforcer smacked him around a bit before calling his name.

“Wake up Officer Max Judah Kane,” Enforcer said mockingly. “We are here to review the retribution our justice system failed to carry out.”

“What retribution? Who the fuck are you?” Kane remembered asking.

“We, are them 'ratchet alligator baits' and 'mud babies,’” Tank said sarcastically.

Kane recognized the voice from somewhere but that was as much as his spotty memory would allow.

“Idn’t that whatcho bitch-ass called us? ‘A bunch of ratchet alligator baits?’” Tank inquired, mockingly.

Enforcer’s maliciously-tinged laugh was heard in the distance.

“Well soon enough, Officer Max Kane, you’ll know what it feels like to actually become alligator baits.” This time, it was Trent’s voice speaking out.

Kane retorted feebly with vained bravado, “I asked you a fucking question! Who the fuck are you?”

Swinging his head around in the direction of the voice, he yelled, “And what the fuck do you want with me?”

“Who we are is not important,” Enforcer said. “And you might call this little exercise, a demonstration of street justice.”

Changing the subject, Broderick said, “Now here’s the deal, Mr. Max Juda Kane. We plan on leaving your ass here a little while longer to think about why this is happening to you.”

That voice he knew. It was the black kid from the park whose mother he had just dispatched. The sniveling puke who was sitting in the courtroom each day, at times looking defiant, at times

licking his wounds.

Broderick continued his taunting with, “But you won’t be alone. An ex-con with a vengeance and a black activist with no compassion for blue-eyed devils will be keeping you company.

You so much as twitch the wrong way and they’ll put a bullet in your head.”

The kid was partly bluffing. There was no intention or need for leaving Kane with babysitters, not with his being securely bound by zip ties and rope.

“Just kill me now. Get it the fuck over with!” Kane said, inwardly entreating he wouldn’t be taken seriously.

Enforcer clapped back menacingly. “Oh, for sho! You ain’t got long! Ain’t no doubt about it, you about to be six feet deep!” To accentuate, he cracked his knuckles, glared at the cop, and reassured, “Best believe that!”

Broderick step in closer and around Enforcer, envying that not a single crack in his co-conspirator showed weakness. Knowing his own brand of intimidation didn’t stand a chance against the heavyweight, he tried, nonetheless.

He pushed his face closer to Kane, eyes enflamed. “Aiight cop! You’re gonna’ give us the real 4-1-1, seeing as how your punk-ass never got up onto that witness stand. We’re gonna’ tape this shit and blast it out all ova the world. So don’t be tryin’ to hold out on us or spit no lame-ass shit. Ya’ heard me?” Broderick both commanded and asked, jutting his chin out for emphasis.

Kane scoffed at the idea. His mouth quivered with displeasure as he awaited the details about his coerced admissions.

“You will admit,” Broderick ordered, “that my mother, Detective Anjanae Bridges, did announce that she was a police officer. That she was reaching for her badge and not a weapon. And you will fess-up that you shot her in cold blood with bad intentions.”

Kane vehemently refused, declaring, “I will do no such thing!”

Like a raging lightning bolt out the blue, Trent Cole materialized. With every bit of indignation and force, that an arm could muster, his fist crashed against the side of Kane's head, with an inquiry, "You sure that's the hill you want to die on fool?"

Kane let out an unyielding scream that echoed off the walls like a thunderclap. Teeth clenched, he lifted his head in radiating defiance with a hard-fought, "Fuck you!"

"Bring me 'the Bitch'!" Enforcer demanded, pointing in the direction of his high-tech stun gun device on a nearby counter.

Tank Willis obligingly walked over to an adjacent counter, retrieved Enforcer's preferred handheld portable device, a compact, convenient, highly effective remedy for making noncompliant captives, suddenly compliant. Seconds later, a force of electricity, more than twelve volts rifled through Kane's shivering body making him feel like he had been fast-tracked into the bowels of hell. Inexplicably, he recovered like a doped-up psychotic feeling no pain, defiant to the core.

"You say something about sending me to hell? Then do it quickly!"

"Fuck it then! Your wish is my command. Everybody fucking out! Everybody!" Enforcer demanded.

All four men departed into the adjacent room.

From inside the paper-thin walls of the room they'd just left, a single gunshot echoed deafly. The noise penetrated the back of Broderick's mind and ventured to a place of raw experience, as he and the others charged back into the room.

The last time Bridges had seen crimson red it was his mother's blood gushing out from damn near every orifice. The scarlet blood oozing from the reddened hole in their captive's thigh was no less sickening.

The site of Kane bowl over, whimpering and sniveling, incoherently muttering profanities,

and the blood pouring from the gunshot wound at his thigh, was humbling. Witnessing the abductee's lifeblood spread out in a dark scarlet pool, brought with it no sense of satisfaction or pleasure, only a bitter emptiness that lingered in the air like a pungent fog. Broderick wondered if the man's actual death likewise would fail to yield the sweet taste of revenge, he had foreseen.

Kane felt a tight pressure in his thighs that hurt like a motherfucker! The searing pain burnt like an invisible flame held against his bare skin. The bullet fragments penetrated mostly flesh although the jarring pressure to his bones and tendons made everything feel wrenched out of place. Enforcer leveled the revolver again, this time aiming it at Kane's head; his fingers quaking as he felt the cold metal grow increasingly heavy with each passing second.

"You *will* comply!"

In that instant, Kane realized he was nothing to the shooter; his life meaningless.

Broderick could only watch, stiff and inert, as Kane stared down at the red blossoming at his thigh, then defiantly back up at Enforcer.

Officer Max Judah Kane stared into the cold, determined eyes of the man undoing the last layer of his blindfold. It was him! The Enforcer! He had almost made good on the original attempt on his life, that day at court. That is, before the operation was foiled. Having no doubt a second attempt would succeed, Kane willfully cooperated. Staring intermittently into the screen, intermittently at the paper in his lap, he recited from the script.

On the evening of July 4th, 2014, at approximately 1:30 PM, Officer Haley and I received a call about a liquor store robbery. We were told the suspects were headed for Cobbs Park. Once on the scene, we had our doubts that the three black men in the park were the actual suspects but that did not matter. We harassed them anyway.

Believing that the narrative was partially true, partially coerced, Kane paused in a feeble attempt to push back. Enforcer pressed the gun tighter and more firmly to the back of his head. The hostage murmured something incoherent, and then read on, reluctantly.

Two of the young men, Broderick Bridges, and Neville Lloyd had no warrants. That was their justification for leaving the scene. In truth, we had no probable cause to detain them. When they ran, I recklessly fired off two rounds before Officer Haley and I pursued them.

Upon arriving at Detective Anjanae Bridges' residence, she stated she was with law enforcement. Actually, this was the second time I had heard about her law enforcement status. Earlier, dispatch had also confirmed this detail. There was no need to shoot Detective Bridges as she was no threat. While he also posed no threat, it was her son I was after.

In my troubled mind, somebody had to pay for my child's death. In 2012, a black man was responsible for killing my daughter; although, I also believed my gunshot may have made the first contact. Either way, I believed it was fitting that it be a black man – or at least someone of his race - whose life I took. Broderick's mother got in the way. She was just another casualty of war.

Upon hearing Kane wrap up his spiel, Trent inquired about the landmarks at Passaic River where Kane's body would be dumped the following morning. Following the logistics overview, they all, departed leaving the captive to think about his final day on earth.

Chapter 16. Coming to Terms

After turning the pillow 45 degrees and back again, Broderick laid his head down and composed himself for sleep. Through an open window, he could still hear the distant sounds of the inner-city carried on a light breeze; sirens wailing, slow-moving trolley cars, the blast of a foghorn, voices of men speaking in Arabic, and heavily accented English.

Not long after, the sweet deadness of sleep overcame him. Less than three minutes into the arms of Morpheus, the sounds of a door squeaking slowly open...footsteps...quiet breathing, infiltrated the room. A lone figure crossed the threshold, parking herself squarely at the foot of his bed. Light shone from directly behind her; backlighting her reflection, making her a black silhouette against the room's sliding glass door.

Her voice, each syllable cutting and fragile, called out, "I've made my peace and so should you. You let God have the last say."

Anjanae's wraith was replaced with another figure pleading his case before a council of stone-faced elders, whose eyes were hardened in judgement; a sign they had already sealed his destiny. Kane was led away in rattling chains to a lake of fire. Anjanae reemerged, arms spread out, palms wide open; a more conciliatory look to her face.

"Son, there's been too much bloodshed. Do not harm a single hair on that man's head. It won't bring me back. Nor will it bring the peace you yearn for. Release him," she pleaded and then evanesced in a clouded mist. When Broderick woke up, it was still dark outside, although thin tendrils of light were warming the horizon, signaling the eventuality of dawn.

His raw energy having been fueled by Anjanae's imposed sense of urgency, Broderick drove down Route 3 at warp speed with a swirling eddy of dust clouds kicking up in his rear. In the back of his mind, certain ironies were cacophonous. The incongruousness of his mother's black Range

Rover transporting him back to square matters with her murderer. Her pleading Kane's case like Saint Procula had pleaded the messiah's inculpability to Pontius Pilate, in 30 A.D. Above all else, her doling out mercy for a despicable parasite who had shown no mercy towards her.

He sped past the vandalized billboard with the skinhead—now with gouged out eyes and a painted-on fist bashing his bloody nose. Almost missing his turn at the monument of the Confederate General on his gallant white horse, Broderick eased into the dip in the road and seconds later into the driveway.

It was 4:45 AM when he arrived at the establishment out in the boonies. Kane's execution was set to go down promptly at 7 AM. Revisiting the plan in his head, Broderick fantasized about Kane's intermediary resting place—the daunting, steel-grey waters of the Passaic. He relished, in equal measure, the thought of a horde of wild, ravenous alligators devouring Kane's rotting flesh. All of which was eclipsed by the earful he'd just received from Anjanae.

The straggly, smelly man lifted his head slowly from a drunken-like stupor. Appraising the obscure figure before him, Kane had deduced he was still in a nightmare. The apparition appeared as none other than a grim reaper with a sharp scythe across his shoulders and a metal container in his hands. At long last Broderick splashed the bucket of cold water into Kane's face. The cop hyperventilated, writhed violently, then tensed up. Unaccustomed to his nerve endings firing all at once, the chain torqued, and Kane's hands and feet wrenched unhappily against the zip-ties.

"You fucking out of your mind!" He yelled, violently expelling water through his nose.

"Time to wake yo' punk ass up fool!"

After cooling off, Kane seemed relieved to see that it was Detective Anjanae Bridge's sole-surviving son, and not his vindictive accomplices or the grim reaper himself. Twenty-two years on the force had taught him how to distinguish between murderers and murderer aspirants. Ever since

his gutless testimony that day on the witness stand, Kane had concluded the kid had no heart. And for damn sure, no real appetite for taking a life. Despite his self-assuredness about Broderick's weak stomach, Kane ordered, "Just do what you fucking came to do," his teeth clenching angrily around the words.

Broderick laughed bitterly and retorted, "You mean to kill you fast, spare you your well-deserved torture? Deny me the privilege of watching your miserable ass suffer before dying? No dice cop!"

"What'a you know about suffering? You know nothing!"

"Here's what I do know cop! You killed an innocent woman who never hurt anyone. And now, you're about to suffer a far worst blow than even death would deal!"

"Then why all the talk wise ass?"

"Yo' dawg, it's not my place to force the Almighty's hands by accelerating your one-way trip to the underworld."

Hearing this, Kane attempted a forward lunge only to meet the brunt force of the restraints snatching him back into his chair.

Unflinchingly, Broderick said coolly, "Sit yo' bitch-ass down! You have no say-so in the matter. By the way, you have my compassionate mother to thank."

"Meaning what exactly?"

"Nevermind cop, time's wasting, plus you wouldn't understand it no how."

Through gritted teeth, Kane rebuffed, "Here's what I do understand punk! At least your mother had the comfort of not having to outlive her only child. Try to fathom a father without that same luxury."

Broderick let his gaze wander slowly down his hostage while dissecting Kane's unintended truths. Why exactly was he outliving his mother? An innocent question, one he didn't have to agonize

over for long. Each tormenting answer curled the anger inside of him like a spring. Truth was, he choked. He panicked. He was inept at circumnavigating her death. At the heart of it all, he was outliving his mother because he was weak and spineless, allowing her to become his bulletproof vest. Feeling the weighty brunt of remorse within every atom of his body, Broderick shot back virulently.

“First of all talk about what you know cop. Best believe, it’s no fuckin’ luxury! If I had it to do all over again, my choices would have been different. And I’d have gladly taken a bullet. You can believe that!”

“Uh-huh, all talk and no action!”

“No cop! That’s real talk! But because you were so quick to fry a Niggah, your racist ass robbed me of that option.”

“Me? A racist? Well now, if that ain’t the pot calling the tea kettle African American. I am no more a racist than that black son-of-a-bitch who never gave my little girl a chance!”

“And you smoked that fool, didn’t you? He dead, ain’t he? What the fuck more you want? You see Niggahs bustin’ a cap in every good ol’ boy’s ass cause one of you rednecks decided to deep-six one of us?”

“No, you sumbitches just slaughter your own. Then blame good cops for trying to stop the bloodletting.”

“Now ain’t that some muthafuckin doo-doo. You’re actually gonna sit there, and mouth some outlandish shit about Niggahs killing Niggahs. Meanwhile, you white-on-white killing machines get a free pass?” Leaning in closer Broderick hissed, “And if by ‘stopping the bloodletting,’ you mean white motherfuckas like you who hunt us down for no reason, pick us off, and leave us for dead in the streets, I say we are better off killing ourselves!”

“Didn’t see y’all complaining when you were begging our lily-white asses to swoop in to shut down dope pushers and crack houses.”

“Oh, my bad. Y'all were out there shuttin' down crack houses when that flatfoot popped a cap in that poor li'l kid with nothin' to his name but a toy gun. Some poor kid who wasn't even a part of the street life. Word on the street is he wasn't slingin' rocks or doin' drugs, you know, just playing with his little toy gat.”

“Yeah well, only a matter of time and he'd be waving a real one in somebody's face. Or worst, pulling the trigger.”

“I believe you're talking about waving a selfie stick right cop? Wasn't that your lame-ass excuse for shooting an unarmed kid a few years back?”

The scathing revelation bounced across the room. The cutting words gave credence, no longer accentuating the self-inflicted aura Kane had induced by killing Kareem Marquis Tyson in 2010. Kane's face twisted into a combative snarl as though assimilating for the first time the correlation between the violence he sowed and the repercussions he reaped—his daughter's own violent end years later.

“Anyway,” Broderick said dishearteningly, “your daughter's murder had nothing to do with me nor my mom! You made it about the color of our skin.”

“Well, you Cocoa Puffs sure as hell set yourself up for it, don't you?”

Broderick pointed a finger directly between Kane's eyes. Enunciating each syllable, he grainily stated, “I dare-yo' fool'ass, to call-me that bullshit again!”

“All I'm saying is, what do you people expect? Traveling in pacts, wearing your hoodies, gold chains, and multi-colored fucking sneakers; pants hanging off your asses looking all suspicious.”

“*You people?* Motherfucka, who the fuck is you talking to with this 'you people' bullshit? Better check that shit! And oh, trust and believe, I get it. It ain't enough yo' bitch'ass wanna tell my kind who we can hang with. Now, you want to define our dress code too. Who the fuck died and left you goody-goody motherfuckas in charge?”

“What I’m simply saying is, people of color draw negative attention to themselves.”

“Yeah, and you black hatin' motherfuckas have dreamt up this whole insane paranoia about black people's criminality and passion for crime. And have sold that jive-honky nonsense for centuries!”

Broderick fired one last salvo hitting his intended target like a stinging, debilitating Juan Manuel Marquez right hook, which knocked Manny Pacquiao out cold—1 minute, 18 seconds into the 6th round. “I'm just saying cop, as for your kid, and her murder, maybe you got back exactly what you gave.”

Kane became fiery red in the face and screamed, “Fuck you reprobate!” Amidst droplets of spit flying from his mouth, he threatened, “I'm warning your black-ass, leave her out of this!”

Seeing anger and grief wrap around Kane like the shackles binding his hands and feet, Broderick actually wished he could eat those words. Even so, the epiphany was not lost. That the death of Jada Kane and Anjanae Bridges were shacklings neither of them could cast off.

“FYI cop. Just before coming here, my deceased mother had a few things she obviously needed to get off her chest. Let's just say, they were revealed in a vision.”

“And I should give a flying fuck why?”

“I just wondered, if you could talk to her, what matters would your late daughter desperately need to square with you?”

Kane paused, stunned and comprehending the strange, off-the-cuff inquiry. His haggard eyes glared fixedly at his abductor as though the final shoe had dropped. Fully attuned to Jada's wishes, he calculated how the whole saga could have been avoided, if only he'd heeded her warnings. ‘No matter what happens dad, no more bloodshed’.

In that one defining second, Broderick and Kane’s eyes met unflinchingly in a moment of perfect clarity. Swiftly, strangely, the world had bridged itself for them. Broderick sensed a crossing

over, a transformation symbolic of the drawbridge of the Passaic rising to let freighters pass, then laying down to let vehicles cross. That part Anjanae had left up to her son to decipher came full circle. Broderick's undeserved guilt over bringing death to his mother's doorstep. Kane's unwarranted remorse of prematurely firing his Glock-22 thus potentially killing his daughter. Both actions had emulsified into one pang of guilt, leaving two unintended casualties of war.

At around 6 AM, the high beams of a vehicle pierced the subdued lighting inside the dwelling. After a bit of grunting and puffing, its engine came to a screeching halt.

"Oh SHIT, goddamnit! They're back!" Broderick yelled vociferously, his eyes flicked about frantically, landing squarely upon the room's only window. Through the filmy, bleary window, Broderick made out the four silhouettes of his co-conspirators exiting the vehicle, heading toward its trunk, unloading the various apparatuses to be used in facilitating Kane's death.

"Need you to listen up cop!" He spat out with urgency, raising his voice. Leaning in closer he advised, "That's if, your ass wanna make it outta this mess alive!"

He began feverously unfastening the chains, zip-ties, and rope around Kane's ankles and stood him upright. Tightening the belt around Kane's flesh wound, he asked, "Can you walk? Better yet, can you walk *really* fast?"

"Yeah, yeah, I think so," Kane said in a grimacing voice.

"Now look," Broderick said pointing sideways, "through that door is another door, leading to a stairwell. It goes into a basement that has a trap door leading outback. I'll help you over there. From there, head off into those woods. Just past a little cabin there's a footpath that'll get you onto an open road. You can't miss it. From there, you are on your own."

"Well, I bet this wasn't a part of the original scheme. "What I want to know is," the cop pressed, almost in a sudden fatherly tone, "why exactly are you doing this? I mean, helping a captive

escape?"

Broderick first inclination was to ask, "You really wanna do this shit right now? Ask questions? But his composure held firm. Too, it hadn't been lost on him that he had just been upgraded from 'punk-ass-bitch' to 'son.' Entertaining the inquiry, Broderick laughed heartily, throwing his head back so that the full throatiness of the sound blared. Then something unyielding flashed through his gaze - like an electric current. His dark-brown eyes suddenly glinted with something undeniably human. The same goodness the kid's mother had always known.

He parted his lips to speak. "No matter how much your people have dehumanized my people, we've always acted with civility and humanity, Mr. Kane. The woman you killed was a patron goddess in that regard. And what can I say? I am, and forever will be, her son."

Broderick hesitated briefly. Then, in a voice suddenly as hard as steel threatened, "But peep this cop. Don't dare mistake this display of kindness for weakness. You try to come for me, and *I will* reconvene the posse and make sure we make good on our original plan."

At first, Kane stiffened at the curt note in his *former* captor's voice. As though knowing it was the one promise 'the kid with no appetite for taking a life' was sure to keep, he softened his stance. "Don't sweat it, son. My word is bond. Besides, you and the whole world have my videotaped confession, remember?"

A few months later, Broderick pulled up to the cemetery where Detective Anjanae Bridges had been laid to rest. Exiting the black SUV, he wandered up to the gated entrance. Instincts prompted his eyes to look beyond the graveyard to a black sedan parked near an open road.

A dark-suited man, in dark sunglasses, stood off in the distance surveying the scene like a broken vessel newly liberated from its darkened waters. Within seconds, amidst the distractions of a few passersby and grave maintenance crew, Kane had disappeared like a wisp of black smoke.

Broderick made his way to the gravesite, where he stood stiffly, eyes deep pools of inexpressible sorrow. After a moment of reflection, his eyes fell upon the wreath left up against Anjanae's tombstone. The mixed assortment of daffodils, blue irises, and ferns, threaded throughout, had been strategically and symbolically tagged: Forgiveness and devotion, amends and understanding, sorrow and repentance. A belated condolence card had been left beside the wreath. Broderick proceeded to read its contents.

Max Judah Kane to Broderick Bridges: *Previously, you asked about what pearls of wisdom my late daughter would have imparted. It's more like, what she actually did say Broderick, in a note I found on her person the night of her death. You can read it for yourself.*

Jada Kane to Max Judah Kane: *No matter what happens dad, no more bloodshed. Killing another innocent black man out of revenge will not bring me back nor will it ease your pain Dad. Besides, those people have already suffered enough misery! Only time and fond memories will bring you the peace you yearn for.*

Max Judah Kane to Broderick Bridges: *I am holding on to the original note but here is the yarn I clipped from Jada's knit shirt that same night. It won't automatically bring you the peace and comfort it brought me but perhaps it could serve as the ties that bind us. I believe they (my daughter, your mom) would have wanted it that way.*

Broderick smiled astutely. Twirling the burnt-red yarn around his fingers, he gazed from Kane's transcriptions back to Anjanae's grave. Impulsively, a brisk wind rose in the north. Subsequently, it died down to a gentle breeze. As though apprehending he was expected to emulate its patterns, Broderick inhaled and exhaled slowly, letting go of his grief. It was only then that the zephyr swayed the dogwood trees, drifting them freely like a newborn day. A cluster of fallen leaves rustled circularly around his ankles, in tiny spirals before skipping along the path. Broderick swore he had heard the tinkle of Anjanae's voice between the whirs of wind and crackling leaves.

Recalling that goofy, V-for-Victory sign his mom made with her index and middle fingers, Broderick knew they were in a 'good' place. That bit of nostalgia forced a blushing smile and the faintest of words, "Yes, I know mother, we got this!"

Curriculum Vita

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He is an award-winning poet, and have self-published a poetry compilation entitled *Conceptions of the Heart and Mind* and a debut Novel, *Same Sins Separate Paths*. His poetry and other works have been featured in *Rewrite Sunlight*, and he has written for *Examiner*, *SinclairNews-LSNewsGroup*, and *This Just In*. He is a current member of the International Association of Professional Writers and Editors (IAPWE). He currently resides in Cypress Texas.