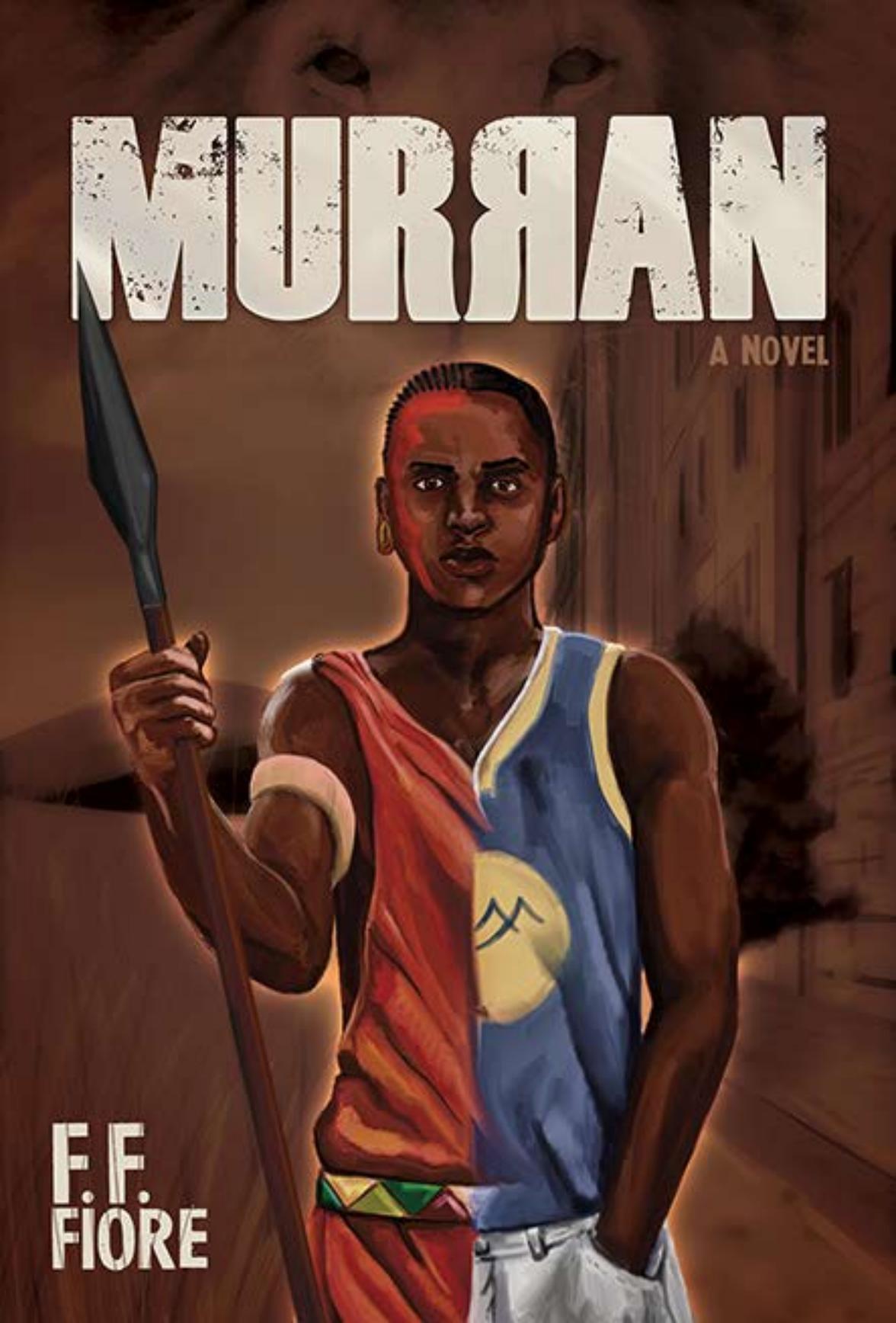


# MURRYAN

A NOVEL

The cover features a central illustration of a young Black man with a determined expression. He has a red mark on his forehead and is wearing a blue tank top with a yellow circular logo and a red sash. He holds a spear in his right hand. The background is a warm, brown-toned street scene with a building and a tree. At the top, a pair of eyes is visible in the shadows.

**F.F.  
FIORE**

# **MURRAN**

BY

F. F. FIORE



# MURRIAN

A NOVEL



F.F.  
FIORE

*Murran*

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*Editors:* Donna Melillo, Kathryn Middleton, Christian Pacheco,  
Kimberly Rooks, Hunter Brown

*Cover Design:* Jason Kauffmann / Firelight Interactive /  
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*Cover Art:* John Douglas Brown

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*With Indigo River Publishing, you can always expect great books,  
strong voices, and meaningful messages.  
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*To Junius*  
*My Ol Sankie*



## AUTHOR'S NOTE

I thoroughly enjoyed writing *Murran*, and I await the controversy that will most probably follow. Portions of *Murran* tell the story of drug gangs and teenage crews in 1980s Brooklyn. The language, scenes, and characters are realistic and gritty. Certain characters use profanity appropriately, and some characters use the “N” word liberally.

I wanted this book to be as close to reality as possible. To that end, names, characters, places, and incidents are composites of real-life characters, places, and incidents. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

One note: The non-profit organization Family MAASAI mentioned in the book did operate for several years in Atlanta, Georgia.

As I have stated, this is a politically incorrect story. The political positions, experience, and beliefs on the African-American experience taken by some characters will not sit well with certain quarters in our society. Just as the characters’ pedagogy is real, straightforward, and direct—holding back no punches—their opinion on the African-American experience in this country may not agree with the current party line, even though the character’s opinions and experiences are based on historical fact.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge the immense assistance in producing this book from my wife Lynne and my mother-in-law Lois, who both did a yeoman’s job of editing the manuscript. And most of all, I acknowledge the immeasurable help from my story polisher Kenji Jasper. Kenji polished my work—adding segments and editing others—until it shined. His work made my story more realistic—the primary objective I sought—and marketable.

**DAYLIGHT FOLLOWS A DARK NIGHT.**

*-Maasai Proverb*

# PROLOGUE

**A**n oven-like breeze blew over the savannah, carrying the sweet scent of the tall amber grass waving in rhythm with the wind. Dust rose in ghostly swirls and then fell into nothingness. Pewter-gray clouds, framed against a sapphire sky, circled the top of the snow-covered Mt. Kilimanjaro, threatening to storm.

All this was of little interest to the great cat as he gorged himself on the carcass of his kill. Under the shade of an umbrella thorn tree, he burrowed his head deep inside the belly of an unfortunate bovine that had wandered away from her herd.

Cracking bones, ripping flesh, and the sourly sweet, copper smell of raw blood were the only sounds and scent for one hundred yards in each direction as he tore into the remains of his victim, consuming her from the inside out.

Then something caught his attention. There was a sound floating on the late afternoon breeze—the sound of small rattling bells. The lion's ears went to full attention, pivoting left and right, searching for the source of his dining disruption.

He lifted his immense head, his mouth and flaxen mane covered in bright red blood. A snarl began to knit across his crimson-stained snout. He slowly stood up, revealing his massive size and strength to the approaching disturbance.

The great cat saw a flash of red cloth in the distance and reacted immediately, recognizing an old enemy—a dangerous enemy. The maned predator rose slowly, advertising its domineering presence.

Now fully erect, he began to pace, walking in small circles, his tail thumping loudly on the dry earth, raising whiffs of dust with each step.

A deafening roar came from deep within his fang-filled maw. It was a warning to this intruder, who had dared to challenge the big cat—the master hunter, the king of beasts—at his own game.

The lion could see a tall, lithe figure dressed in a bright red robe as he came closer. But it was the long object glistening in the sunlight that held the great cat's full attention—a spear.

The man, almost as dark as coal itself, and as slender as a model on a runway, held the pointed weapon high above the sea of knotted hair covering his skull. In the other hand was a cowhide shield the shape of a spinach leaf and covered with cowrie shells.

The great cat roared again, and this time the ground trembled. The sound in itself would have made most men lose control of their bowels. But the man in red continued his approach, resolute and determined.

The big cat became angrier. It stepped forward into the arena, snarling as it paced around its kill. He didn't want to face his ancient enemy, but he refused to leave his prize. He paused, fixing determined yellow eyes on his adversary as a burning rage arose from his belly.

Then he attacked. With a running leap, the lion sprang up on its hind legs, hurling his ten feet of sinuous length directly at his enemy. His heavy body was now fully elongated and, with sharp, crimson-covered claws wide open in front, the great feline gave one last ear-piercing roar.

Then he felt it. The spear's long shaft went into his neck, just as he was about to lock his bloodstained jaws upon his enemy's head. The weapon penetrated the big cat's body all the way to the tail as the great cat fell to the ground and began to convulse.

It was dead a few moments later.



Matumbo looked down to see the last foot of his spear sticking out of the lion's body. Gray clouds boiled above him, thickening and growing dark. A storm was coming. A strong gust of wind blew across the savannah, carrying the promise of welcomed rain. Matumbo's robe billowed in the cool breeze as it slapped against his knees.

He knelt down and drew the long blade hanging on his right hip, grabbed the tail of the dead lion, and, with one quick slice, took it as

## MURRAN

his trophy. He stuck it on his spear and raised it high above his head in triumph as a streak of lightning flashed across the sky.

This sealed his rite of passage.

He was Maasai.

He was a warrior.

He was Murran.

***PART ONE***  
**TRANSITION**

**T**rey Gerard Davis, you're under arrest for murder."

*The words from the first of the two airport security guards didn't surprise Trey. As a matter of fact, he had been expecting them.*

*He had patiently waited in line with the others seeking entry into the United States at JFK's International Terminal. He knew his fate would be sealed once the customs agent ran his passport.*

*A rotund customs agent with short-cropped hair under her official-looking cap gave him a suspicious look as the laser scanned the bar code underneath his name, birthdate, and place of residence. Her eyebrows went up. Then she murmured something into the radio on her left shoulder. Trey could barely make out the words; but within moments, he was detained by the two burly airport guards.*

*Then the cuffs went "click."*

*He was led on display through the crowded terminal toward the security area. Once there, he was escorted to a holding room no bigger than a small bedroom. The holding tank smelled like the stale air coming out of the square lily-white air conditioning duct overhead. The guard then pointed to the stout officer with the coffee-stained tie and crumbs on the front of his uniform.*

*"This officer will wait here with you."*

*As he turned to leave, the guard with "Matthews" on his nametag raised a pointed finger and gave Trey a stern look. "Don't make any trouble."*

*Trey nodded but said nothing.*

*Once the guard left, Trey found a hard metal chair against the wall near the air duct and sat. The second guard, a bald Hispanic man with a gleaming gold crucifix around his neck, stared silently at Trey, his eyes glued to the boy's every movement.*

*Trey adjusted his rear against the cold hard seat and then absent-mindedly reached for the oval-shaped pouch around his neck. He fingered the talisman, a gift from the old laibon—and a reminder of the promise he had made to return to America and face his fate.*

*He thought back over the path of that fate—a journey begun little more than a year before, one that started on a subway ride to Brooklyn.*

# CHAPTER ONE

It was morning again in America, and Ronald Reagan was in the White House. It was another morning for Trey and his sister Nichelle as they rode with their mother on the Downtown F towards Bedford Stuyvesant, Brooklyn.

The gentle rocking of the car would have easily put Trey to sleep had it not been for his younger sister's constant protests.

"Why do we have to live with Grandma!?" Nichelle complained, her words punctuated by the thumping cadence of train wheels rolling over the iron tracks beneath them.

"Don't you love Grandma Abbey?" Shalayna, their mother, a slender woman with deep curves, peanut-butter skin, and hazel eyes, replied. As she spoke, she pulled her freshly pressed hair into a long ponytail, minus a few rogue strands that refused to cooperate.

"Yeah," Nichelle said, lowering her head shamefully. "We always have fun at Grandma's. But I want to go back home."

The "home" Nichelle referred to was, to Trey, a grungy, rat-infested apartment in Harlem that bore no resemblance to the home he knew. Two years before, they had all lived in a small, tidy house in Lilydale, New York, where his father, a mechanic, owned a three-bay auto repair shop that specialized in brakes and transmissions.

As the subway car's wheels grated along the steel tracks, Trey reminisced about those times with his father.

Gerard Davis was a tall man with skin so dark that he almost seemed to glow in the sunlight. He always smiled at his children, even when he wasn't in the best of moods.

He would come home from the garage early twice a week to make them dinner with his own hands, just to make sure that Trey and the rest of the family knew how important they were to him. He brought home pizza every Friday and would let Dave, his other mechanic, a short and muscular white boy in his 20s and covered with tattoos, run the garage on Saturday mornings so he could sit and watch cartoons with Trey while his mom and sister slept.

Since his father worked such long hours, Trey would often go to the garage right after school to spend time with him. In the summers, he would spend entire days there, listening to his father's stories and riding shotgun while Dad test-drove the newly repaired vehicles.

Trey learned a lot about those cars—how to drive them, their make, model, performance—and how much they were worth. They were cars neither of them would ever be able to afford themselves—BMW's, Mercedes Benzes, Jags, Audis, and Lincoln Town Cars.

People said Gerard was the best mechanic in town.

Then they moved.

When it was announced that they were leaving, Shalayna explained to Trey that his father couldn't afford to open a repair shop in Harlem. Everything was much too expensive in New York for him to have his own garage, but he had found a job as a car mechanic.

"You can't go back, baby," his mother said.

Shalayna could see her little girl maturing well beyond fourteen. Nichelle had grown so much that she almost seemed like a stranger. She was two years younger than Trey but looked older. Her body had developed early and drew plenty of attention from boys and full-grown men alike.

Shalayna didn't know what she was going to do about Nichelle, just like she didn't know what to do about most things. As she took sips out of the tall can of King Cobra she had tucked into her plastic purse, she kept one eye on the lookout for some transit cop that might try and give her a ticket.

Shalayna couldn't admit to her children that the initial family move had been all her idea. She was sick of small-town life, and the dope up

there was shit. The people up there were shit. In her fractured mind, she had somehow thought that the city could somehow save her.

For Gerard, it had been two parts pressure and one part guilt. He had promised Shalayna the world when they got married. But in her eyes, he had never delivered.

The house always had something that needed fixing. The kids always wanted something that they couldn't have. The only time she knew any real kind of satisfaction was when she was high.

"This is the only way I know how," she said with a sigh. From time to time, she would tell herself that she would get clean one day and make it all up to them. She was thirty-three now. That was too young to completely give up on what *she* wanted.

"But why can't you stay with us at Grandma's?"

"I can't, baby. I just can't."



## CHAPTER TWO

**A**s the sound of his mother's words echoed in his mind, Trey looked out the subway car window as the express train sped through the stations, carrying him further and further away from Harlem. The sporadic beat of the florescent lighting from the platforms flashed through his window as his mind wandered back to Harlem and the incident at Douglas Middle School.

He wasn't particularly surprised that a fight had started in English class on a Wednesday afternoon. It never would have happened Upstate, but he had gotten used to them in Harlem.

Trey had only gotten into one fight at Douglas. It had been in Mr. Webb's math class with a lanky black boy named Steve Craig.

Steve was a skinny kid about Trey's height but missing about half of the meals each week. He used to wear the same jacket and shirt to school every other day, and he smelled like showers were a monthly event at his house. Steve always had this glazed-over look, like his brain was somewhere else.

But Steve had come more than alive when Trey had asked him a question. "Is the shower in your house broken or somethin'?"

Trey hadn't meant anything by it. He remembered the time the water main burst near the house when he and his sister used to live Upstate. Because of the water ration, they couldn't take showers for a week. Trey hoped that it might have been something like that. But the boy's reasons for smelling like dirty drawers didn't matter once the ugly words came out of Steve's dirty mouth.

"That's why yo' Mama suck dick for rock!" Steve had yelled out while Mr. Webb was writing out a long word problem on the board that

had something to do with how many sides of beef Joe could put into a pickup truck with a two-ton limit.

Something had snapped inside of Trey when he heard the words about his mother. Steve couldn't have understood why his words hurt, just like Trey didn't know that Steve's mother had spent the money for their water, power bills, and food on crack.

They were two peas in a pod. And they were way past talking it out.

Trey grabbed Steve by the collar of his wrinkled shirt and pulled the boy into his fist over and over. Blood was dripping from Steve's nose as Trey's knuckles were beginning to skin. But the Upstate boy just kept going until Mr. Webb pulled him off of Steve, the boy's blood all over his own shirt. Trey's victim lay on the classroom floor, seeing stars and breathing through his bloody mouth.

Mr. Webb dragged Trey, kicking and screaming, all the way to the principal's office, where he cooled off for the rest of the day, then got suspended for another two. Once he calmed down, Trey had trouble understanding that he'd almost broken the boy's nose and fattened his lip for three days.

He didn't process the fact that he was still angry about his father's violent death. He didn't see how much the city had changed him in just a few weeks out of Upstate. Something had to turn the key in that engine. And Steve's words had been just the thing.

Trey became a loner after his father's death. After the funeral, it bothered him to see any of his few friends spending time with their fathers. When he saw as much as a hug or a pat on the head from father to son, it reminded him that he had been robbed of the person who mattered to him—of the one voice which seemed to understand the world he'd been born into.

Without his father around, Trey started cutting school. While in Lilydale there was no place to go, Harlem was an endless maze of possibilities.

Sometimes he would watch older dudes play ball in Garvey Park, or he would jump the turnstiles and ride the train up to Grant's Tomb, just to take in the size of the building and imagine how many men's hands it had taken to build the thing.

He'd walk up and down 125<sup>th</sup> Street and see the young hustlers his age doing hand-to-hands with the crackheads who'd scraped together enough cash for their next hit, usually by way of Grandma's good silverware, breaking and entering, or turning tricks in the alleys up past Harlem Hospital near Pan Pan, which had the best waffles Trey had ever had in his life.

To cover his tracks, Trey intercepted the letters the school sent home about his unacceptable number of absences. Knowing that child welfare might show up if his mother didn't respond, Trey learned how to copy her signature and would drop the forms off after the school closed. He knew that someone would find the envelopes and take them to the school office. No one would care enough to ask why a mother didn't take the time to deliver them herself. For all they knew, his mother was disabled, worked all day, or couldn't stand to be reminded of the day she dropped out.

None of these were lies, and that fact made him feel a little better about it.

Trey rarely saw the other kids that cut class. They were more likely to train down to the Meadow in Central Park or to the video arcade right under the elevated tracks at 135<sup>th</sup> Street Station. The kids he did see were of another kind entirely. They lived a different life—one that Trey barely understood and did his best to steer clear of.

It wasn't strange to run across five or six kids stomping on one or two others in front of an apartment building or to watch three or four of them carrying bats and nunchucks being chased down the street by some store owner or middle-aged security guard who brandished a loaded .38 pistol. Sometimes entire groups of them, dressed alike to identify themselves as a gang, would walk right past him without a word or a look. It almost felt like he wasn't there at all.

Trey became adept at hopping walls and the wire fences in the backs of alleys when he saw the truant officers raiding the local hangouts to take the kids back to school where they belonged, even though it was hard to learn in rooms packed with thirty to forty kids apiece.

It was near one such escape route, a narrow alley between 120<sup>th</sup> and 121<sup>st</sup> that was mainly for sewer run-off, that Trey first saw a man

murdered. Perched on the first level of a corner fire escape of a four-story tenement building, he would sometimes sit and watch whatever show might be playing that night.

On this particular night, death was the star of the show.

Below, Trey noticed a fortyish, light-skinned man in a dark suit, his small Afro shaped up perfectly across the front and back. He had been resting on the downed ladder of a rusty fire escape about one hundred yards away. The man had crept out of the rear of the house to meet a boy, who looked about twenty, wearing a white tennis headband, jeans, and a New York Yankees jersey.

The conversation began as a whisper. Then voices rose as Trey heard water dripping from last night's rain somewhere.

Suddenly, there was a bright flash of light, and the businessman fell to his knees, collapsing headfirst, his skull crashing against the asphalt.

The kid in the jersey ran, dropped a shiny .38 revolver on the ground, hopped a fence, and rushed past the building where Trey was perched without seeing him. If the shooter had seen him, he too might have ended up dead.

It took a minute or so for Trey to fully process what had happened. The sound of the gun had been as loud as he'd imagined that it might be. But then again, he was in the city now, where something was always making noise. He sat on the fire escape staring at the still figure in the street for the longest time. Not one person in the neighborhood showed up to come to the man's aid.

Apparently no one seemed to care.

The subway train flashed through another station, and with it came another memory of Harlem—another school incident at Douglas speeding through Trey's mind.

Trey was watching two girls battle it out in the lunchroom one day. Tamika Anderson and Shantika Bey were going after each other like they'd been promised a championship payday. Their English teacher Mrs. Hinnant, who was close to sixty, took a jab or two herself while trying to keep them apart. The old lady went down with a thud. Then

there was a snap as her shoulder dislocated. She screamed so loud that the students thought one of the girls had a knife.

Other teachers rushed in.

Mr. Wharton, the security guard who'd once played for the Tampa Bay Bucs, and Mr. Spanner, the gym teacher with more than thirty different warm-up suits, pulled the girls apart and took them to the office.

Ms. Edson, the assistant principal who had lost a big toe while mowing her own lawn in Queens, passed the old lady to an administrative aide, who took her to the nurse's office while she established order.

"Read your textbooks until the bell rings!" Ms. Edson yelled, as if it had been the class and not the two screaming girls who were arguing over a stolen leather jacket. Apparently, the beeper in the pocket had gone off in a locker other than the one Shantika had left it in.

"I heard it was a fight in Ms. Hinnant's class!" Nichelle shouted excitedly later, with a thick wad of grape Bazooka between her teeth.

"Yeah," Trey replied. "Shantika and Tamika started fightin' over a coat and a beeper."

"What she need a beeper for?" Nichelle grunted. "She with a hustler or somethin'?"

"Hustler" was one of the many slang words for drug dealer. And in the 80s, there was at least one on every block. Trey and Nichelle knew this just like every kid in the five boroughs knew it.

Selling crack, the cheapest and most powerful drug on the street, was easier to do than getting a job flipping burgers. All you had to do was know somebody who knew somebody. That somebody brought you to one of the street captains. If the street captain knew the person who knew you and you didn't have a rep for being a snitch, related to a cop, or somebody without the heart to handle it, then you were in. Beeperers were the way dealers kept in touch with their clients and suppliers. And the dumb ones were never too quiet about it.

"I don't know," Trey grunted. "One girl took the other girl's jacket, and they started swinging like dudes. Ms. Hinnant tried to break it up, but she fell down and hurt her arm. We probably gonna have substitutes for two weeks."

The subway car flew out of the tunnel and into the early morning light, shaking Trey from his thoughts. The lines of brownstone houses in the distance were nothing like their little home Upstate. Every day, it felt like he was in a foreign land, but not like the ones his father had told him about.

His dad was not a particularly educated man. But he knew a lot about Africa, especially the southern part of the continent, from the many books he'd read in the Lilydale public library from the time he was a teen.

Fascinated with the protests for the release of Nelson Mandela in South Africa, he had committed himself to learning everything he could—not only about that, but about the “Front Line” nations pressuring South Africa to end its discriminatory policies against black people there.

He was especially intrigued by the culture of the traditional tribes in Central and East Africa, in particular the Maasai, whom he had first learned about while watching a nature show on television. It talked about how the hunting of lions was the initiation in a young boy's journey into manhood. Their warrior men were called Murran.

A little more than two years before, on Trey's fourteenth birthday, he had given Trey a well-worn picture of a Maasai warrior that he had kept in his wallet for many years. The Murran was dressed in a red robe, holding a long, metal-tipped spear and a cowhide shield.

Trey had always imagined that the Murran feared nothing. He framed the picture and put it on his nightstand, where it had stayed until they moved.

His father also gave him the piece of red cloth he used as a handkerchief to mop his brow while he worked. He had said it was made from a shuka, lengths of cloth Maasai women tied around their shoulders as capes or around the waist as a skirt.

“Sweat is work,” his father had told him once while aligning the front end on an old '76 Honda Accord. “You keep this in your pocket, and the work stays on your mind.”

## MURRAN

Trey always carried it with him whenever he had a hard job to do. Gerard had told Trey that someone who was actually living in Kenya, where many of the Maasai live, had given the rag to him. This wasn't true though; he had just been entertaining his little boy. But the story and message behind it made it real.

Trey had truly been happy with his family in that little town Upstate. Then everything went to hell—and he blamed his mother for it all.



## CHAPTER THREE

“**H**ow long do we have to stay at Grandma Abbey’s?” Nichelle whined. “I gotta get back to my peoples!”

Trey looked over to his right and saw a homeless man who smelled like he hadn’t washed in a year. The man, whose hair and face were so dirty he could barely tell what race he was, started looking in their direction, straining to hear their conversation.

Trey wasn’t sure which was worse—the odor emanating from him or the lustful way the bum was leering at his little sister. Trey tried to ignore the smelly man by reading the small, elongated ads above the car’s windows.

One caught his attention. It was a Nike ad and had a picture of Bo Jackson, who played both professional football and baseball at the same time, espousing the benefits of a new, very expensive cross-training shoe. Below the shoe was the tagline “Just Do It.”

*Not without money.*

Unlike her older brother, Nichelle enjoyed the hustle and bustle of Harlem. After school and from their fire escape, Nichelle loved watching the hundreds of men, women, and children shopping or going to work, school, or no place in particular.

And in Harlem, there were plenty of kids her age to play with. They would run up and down the street, in between cars, and behind the white spray street-cleaning trucks that blasted the garbage into the sewers every seven days. They would race in the street, proud that they were powerful enough to stop traffic without getting hit. She felt like Harlem gave her power, sharing that sentiment with the woman who birthed her.

Nichelle was often the last child back into the building where they lived. Unlike others, her mother was never home long enough to call her in when it was getting dark and dangerous.

“You’ll make new friends,” Shalayna replied, a slur in her voice, her nose wrinkling when the homeless man’s odor blew past her. “You’ll see. You’ll find new friends—better friends than the ones you had up there.”

“I like the friends I already got,” she said. “I don’t want to leave!” Tears began to crawl down her cheeks. Then she turned angry eyes at Trey. “It’s Trey’s fault, isn’t it?” she cried. “It’s his fault we had to leave!”

Shalayna straightened herself out and turned to Trey, reaching out to touch his arm, before looking over at her daughter sitting next to her, unable to avoid the look on her daughter’s face.

“You right,” she said, taking the girl’s hand with her other arm. “We had to leave. He woulda killed your brother. You don’t want Trey dead now, do you?”

Shalayna hid the tears welling up in her eyes with a brush of her fingers. “He was brave and did what a man should do. He protected me. He protected us.”

Seeing tears form in his mother’s eyes, Trey put his arm around her shoulder and pulled her close. She sobbed softly into his chest. Trey loved his mother very much, and it distressed him to watch a beautiful woman change so dramatically right before his eyes.

But Shalayna’s drug habit, the source of most of his parents’ arguments, had begun before he was born. It was a miracle that she had stayed completely sober for the nine months it took to give birth to two healthy babies. And even then she had slipped once or twice. Other girls she got high with had told her that you had to do it every day to really fuck up your baby.

In Harlem, she spent most of her time at the Lenox Lounge with her live-in boyfriend Isaac Marcus. After leaving the club, Marcus would take her to a spot on Adam Clayton Powell to cop their high for the night.

If they had money, they were in the two-bedroom tenement long enough to exchange money for dope and then leave. If not, Marcus

would have to find someone interested enough in the prize between Shalayna's thighs to sponsor their late night puff from the glass pipe. Forty bucks bought them a daylong trip to ghetto heaven. Their next morning marked the starting line for running the same process all over again.

There would be days at a time when Marcus and Shalayna didn't come home at all. Trey then had the duty of feeding his sister and himself. Trey knew how to make sandwiches out of almost anything. There wasn't always meat in the middle. Sometimes it was lettuce and tomato with imitation bacon bits, or jelly without peanut butter. But they always ate.

Trey thought that if he thought hard enough, he could make things at least as good as they were when his dad had been alive. But that was because he was still a boy. Soon, he would be a man.

Marcus, a giant of a man, had made that clear when Trey had tried to stop him from beating his mother after yet another instance of her smoking through their stash while he was "working" out on the street, or, more accurately, watching his girls sell their asses in hiked skirts up on Grand Concourse.

Trey was in the kitchen having the first dinner his mother had made for them in weeks—barely battered chicken dripping with grease and homemade French fries he could have thrown together when he was ten. Nichelle's chair was empty, as she was out in front of the building being courted by the cluster of young dealers who hung out in front of the liquor store across the street.

Then Marcus came in, drunk and belligerent. He stumbled, leaned against the back of Shalayna's chair at the small dining table for support, and then grabbed her by the back of her neck, lifting her up to her feet. The linebacker-sized man proceeded to ram his closed fist into her face four times, calling her "bitch" like it was her birth name.

This wasn't the first time this scene had played out in front of Trey. It happened about once a month or so. Sometimes it was quick slaps; but once, Trey had watched Marcus throw her from one side of the room to the other, tearing a tendon that gave her a limp for a month.

Now, Trey couldn't take it anymore. Trey knew his fists weren't strong enough, so he grabbed a knife from the kitchen.

Marcus saw Trey and turned, snarling with breath that smelled like a mix of Crown Royal and Juicy Fruit. He lunged for Trey like the boy had already slashed him and then pried the knife from his hands more easily than if the boy had given it to him. He grabbed Trey by the collar of his shirt, ripping it half off his body as he swung him around and slammed the wiry boy into the kitchen table.

"I'll kill you, you little bastard!" He spit against Trey's back before the boy melted to the floor in pain, blood flowing from his upper lip.

Marcus raised the knife over his head, intent on burying it in Trey's spine.

"No, baby!" Shalayna screamed. "Baby, please stop! I'll get you some more, baby! You know I'll work it off!"

Marcus turned his hulk toward her, still holding Trey flat against the floor with his free arm. Seeing her sobbing, Marcus threw the knife down on the table and stormed out of the apartment.

"You a dead lil' nigga if I see you again," he murmured as he staggered out the front door, slamming it behind him so hard that the entire apartment shook.

By the time Nichelle got home, Trey and his mother had packed what they needed and the three, under strong protests from the youngest of them, left for Brooklyn—and safety from Marcus—just as the sun was coming up.

## CHAPTER FOUR

**T**he slow deceleration of the train signaled their arrival at Nostrand Avenue station, which was just a few blocks from where Grandma Abbey lived on Madison. The doors flew open, disgorging its passengers onto the station platform. The family gathered their things and welcomed themselves back to Brooklyn. The smell of alcohol, urine, and day-old garbage on the station platform let them know that nothing had changed since the last time they'd been there.

The family made their way over the cold, dank, dirty floor toward the concrete exit stairs blackened with eighty years of dirt and grime. At the top, they entered a long, poorly lit tunnel where Lysol mixed with funk and filth created an odor that made Trey want to throw up.

There were several homeless people huddled in the tunnel. One stood up on shaky legs and asked for a cigarette from Shalayna. None of the three gave him as much as eye contact.

The family walked through tunnel walls that were dilapidated, with white tiles missing from parts of it, exposing the concrete underneath. The floors were covered with old gum, dirt, and a brown sludgy liquid that dripped from cracks in the ceiling.

As they walked along the tunnel, past newsstands arrayed with gaudy periodicals and up toward the street level, the sounds of harmonizing voices fluttered toward them from somewhere in the tunnel beyond. A group of men were singing a Motown song in harmony—Smokey Robinson's "Tracks of My Tears."

Outside, in the slightly cleaner air and blessed summer sunshine, it was just a short walk to Grandma Abbey's brownstone apartment in Bed-Stuy, their new home.



## CHAPTER FIVE

**S**halayna led her family down streets lined with four-story brownstones and apartment buildings—white brick turned yellow or red brick turned black—to Grandma Abbey’s apartment.

They stopped in front of a four-story brownstone tenement that had seen better days. On the wall written in spray paint were the words “Bed-Stuy. Do Good.” Shalayna grasped the hands of the children on both sides of her and sighed.

She led them up the ornate metal railings of the stone stoop of stairs and pushed open the tall, heavy, double-glass doors, dimmed by dirty grease that made the tiled vestibule almost as dark as night. Clutching the worn, wooden banister, Trey’s mother led them up the dimly lit wooden stairwell, with walls painted a garish yellow, to their destination.

Shalayna knocked on the metal-encased wood door and, looking left and right before she went back to center, let out a deeper sigh than the one before.

Trey knew, from previous visits, it would take Grandma Abbey some time to shuffle up the long hall to the front door once she heard a knock. Trey and Nichelle’s visits there had begun so amicably when they first moved to the city—the bright spots in darkening times. But once the arguments erupted between his mother and Grandma Abby over the life Shalayna was leading and her irresponsible parenting, another peaceful place was filled with war.

A few minutes later, a short, round, elderly black woman with thinning silver hair opened the door a crack and peered under the security chain across the entrance.

“Hello, Mama,” Shalayna said.

Grandma Abbey pushed her round eyeglasses higher on her nose and gave Shalayna an impassive look. But her face brightened, crinkling her eyes behind the thick spectacles, when she saw her two precious grandchildren.

“Come on in, babies,” she said with a smile, flashing the gold cap over her top right incisor.

Trey always enjoyed the smell of his grandmother’s apartment. One would expect it would have an old lady’s smell like dry parchment, rose water, and mothballs. But the sweet aroma of fresh baked goods, greens, and beans almost always permeated the flat. It was a welcome change from the takeout dinners and fast food that his mother served them occasionally.

Clicking her metal cane on the hardwood floor, she led them into the living room, just to the right of the entry, brightly lit by the summer sunshine streaming through the three front windows overlooking the street. The paint on the handcrafted moldings was in need of a touch-up. Still, one could see the old beauty of the brownstone peeking through in places, particularly in the archway between the living room and master bedroom. It was still beautifully scalloped. One or two more such beauties were probably hidden behind the drywall.

Grandma Abbey motioned for Trey and Nichelle to sit on the overstuffed paisley couch. Shalayna sat on one of the threadbare chairs across from Grandma Abbey.

“My babies are growing up,” she noted, giving Trey and Nichelle a closer look.

Trey favored his mother. He had lighter skin—more peanut brown than fudge black. The tight coils of hair in his overgrown Afro looked like steel wool woven into cornrows.

“You look like a young man,” she said proudly.

Trey smiled bashfully.

Grandma Abbey then turned her attention to the young miss sitting next to her brother. Her shoulder-length curly auburn hair was tied back under a green and orange headband framing a still-innocent face. Her

caramel eyes were striking. They were almost a light brown and danced above her cheeks.

“And Nichelle,” Grandma added. “You’re turning into an ebony beauty.”

Then the awkward moment came—the one where Abbey motioned Shalayna toward the wicker chair in the corner with the fanned back that no one ever sat in unless they were in trouble. Grandma Abbey reached into her pocket and produced a five-dollar bill.

“Why don’t you two run up the street and get some patties from the Jamaican place?”

At that point, Trey had only been to the restaurant twice, and his grandmother had been with him both times, but he was pretty sure he knew how to get there. He also knew that neither of them wanted to be there for what was about to go down between his mother and grandma.

Nichelle waited for her brother to move toward the door and then silently followed behind him.

“See you later, Ma,” Trey said as he opened the door.

“Love you, Ma,” Nichelle said, smiling.

Trey closed the door behind them, somehow knowing that neither of them were going to see Shalayna for some time. It wasn’t their mother’s face that told this particular story, but Grandma’s Abbey’s.



## CHAPTER SIX

**Y**ou ain't doin' this no more!" Grandma Abbey barked.

"Marcus just got out of control, Mama. Trey shouldn't have..."

Those were the only words Shalayna got out of her mouth before her mother tore into her.

"Did you just blame my grandson for gettin' beaten half to death? You don't think I saw dem cuts and bruises! Did you just put your junkie pimp over your own first-born son?!"

"He was gonna kill him, Ma!"

"And what do you think he's gonna do to *you*!?"

A shiver went through Shalayna. Her mother was a knife, and she was on a plate getting cut to pieces. But it wasn't the words that were hurting her so much. It was the truth behind them.

"He was just upset," she said, shaking her head.

Abbey could see that her youngest child's hands were trembling. She wasn't sure whether it was her nerves or her need for another fix.

"He didn't mean it."

The old lady relaxed her accusing eyes and said softly, "I sent you away all dem years ago to try and keep you from turnin' into what I'm lookin' at! And what did you do!?"

"Mama, I..."

"I'm not done yet, child!" Abbey's voice rose an octave. "Your sister took you in up there, cleaned you up, and brought you to the good man you married. Gerard was a good man. But you fucked him up too!"

Grandma Abbey leaned forward in her chair and narrowed her eyes at her daughter. "And how did you repay him? After years of a good Christian life in that small town, you went right back to old habits."

Shalayna tried to light a cigarette, but Abbey slapped it out of her hand and it disappeared over the left arm of the chair.

“Not in *my* house you don’t!”

Her mother went on.

“He used to call me up from work and tell me how you was. Said you complained about everything: the town, the people, and how ‘boring’ he was because he didn’t like to go out and party half the night when you had kids at home.” She seared her eyes into her daughter. “You burn down everything you touch, Shalayna!”

She continued her inquisition. “And now you on the pipe. I see them dark circles under your eyes. I watch *Donahue*. I’m your mother. You can’t play me for no fool!” She pointed to the long-sleeved blouse covering Shalayna’s arms down to her wrists. “And wearing that in this summer heat doesn’t fool anyone.”

Shalayna involuntarily ran her hand over her right arm and started to weep.

Grandma Abbey didn’t let up on the poor woman.

“And I assume you never told Trey and Nichelle the truth of what happened?”

Shalayna shook her head. “I told them their father was killed in a drive-by shooting coming home from work one night.”

“And what about Trey?” Have you ever told him *his* truth?”

Shalayna eyes widened and shook her head. “I could *never!*”

Grandma Abbey returned to her indictments of the young woman. “You call me and say you need money for the light bill! You call me and say you need money for the gas bill, like I’m down here livin’ on *Green Acres* or somethin’ my damn self! I write you the check and the lights go off anyway! I call over there while the phone still work, and Trey says they been livin’ off chicken boxes ‘cuz you ain’t paid the gas bill yet! I’m sick of it, Shalayna!” she shouted. “It makes me sick!”

Grandma Abbey stopped to catch her breath. At sixty-three, her heart was still strong. Her skin was still tight. Life clung to her like superglue.

Each word had been a fist to Shalayna. Now she was down for the count.

“I didn’t mean for it to be like this. Gerard kept it together.”

“And *you* was supposed to hold *him* together. But you fucked that up too!” Abbey pressed on. “That boy damn near killed himself trying to make enough money to please you.”

She reached up and grabbed her daughter by the arm. “He would visit me now and then when he worked that ‘part-time job’ here in Brooklyn.” She emphasized with contempt the words “part-time job.” “I saw the emotional distress it caused him, and I warned him, but he wouldn’t listen.”

Her voice softened. “He loved you that much, and would do anything for you.”

“I was so sorry,” Shalayna murmured. “I was so sorry I drove him to that.”

“You need to go,” Abbey said, a firm finger pointing toward the front door.

“The kids can’t stay?” Shalayna mumbled.

“No. *They* can stay as long as they want. But *you* gotta go. And you can’t come back here until you’re clean, *and* you got a job, *and* you got a plan for your life.”

“But how do I know when that’s gonna be?”

“I don’t know, but you better figure it out. You and me are gonna take a trip over to the high school before the week is out. And you’re gonna sign whatever papers make me their legal guardian. You’ll be their mother again when *I* say so. You fight me, and I’ll tell child services *everything* they need to know to give ’em to me free and clear.”

The room went silent again. Without another word, Abbey went into the kitchen and put on a pot of coffee. She came back out of the kitchen just to make sure her daughter was still breathing.

“Now sit up straight. We gonna have some coffee before you go.”



## CHAPTER SEVEN

“I don’t think we’re gonna see Mama for a while,” Trey said as they arrived at the corner of Fulton and Nostrand and then hung a left. In front of them was John Brown’s Jamaican Bakery, the third storefront on the left side of the street.

“Why do you say that?” Nichelle asked. Not waiting for an answer, she quickly turned her attention to her feet. “We almost there? My feet hurt.” The soles on both of their shoes were thin. Shalayna had bought both pair for twenty dollars. Anything she bought—or boosted for them—was sure to fall apart within a week.

As they entered the narrow shop, the brother and sister duo were almost knocked to the ground by two screw-faced Rastas in red, yellow, and green tank tops pushing out of the entrance. One of the two dreadheads was carrying a heavy brown paper bag that appeared to be stuffed solid with cash.

The man at the counter, Mr. Scharff, though as dark as a Snickers bar, looked like he’d just seen a ghost. But he snapped into a grizzled “rude boy” stance when he saw the two teenagers.

“What you a-want?!” Scharff all but yelled.

Trey could see a tall, heavy woman with similar features working to Scharff’s right and a lighter, more Indian-looking man managing pots and pans near the ovens in the back.

“Two beef patties,” Trey said. “And a Coke.”

“But I want Sprite.” Nichelle yelled.

“Five dollars is enough for a patty and a can each, right?”

Scharff gave them a grunt and a nod.

Trey put the five on the counter, feeling like a big shot. Scharff twisted around to his people in the back.

“Give me two a-patty!” Scharff yelled.

“They no a-ready yet. Five minutes!” the heavy woman replied.

“You have to wait,” Scharff told Trey, as if he was deaf. “Five minute.”

“I hope it don’t take too long,” Nichelle sighed. “We ain’t have no breakfast.”

Trey ignored his sister and glanced at the wall of photographs taped above the cash register behind the counter. They were pictures of Scharff and what looked like his family back in Jamaica.

In one, he and the woman working next to him—who must have been his sister—were much younger, just a little older than Trey and Nichelle, standing in front of a waterfall with green coconuts that had straws in them. He knew where Jamaica was on a map, but he had never imagined being there. In some ways, Jamaica seemed further away than Africa. At least his dad had talked to him about Africa.

“Hey girl,” a voice said from behind Trey. He turned around to see a tall boy of over six feet, his hair cut in a low Caesar, towering over Nichelle with a grin on his face.

Nichelle was smiling at him shyly.

“Hi,” she said, hoping that Trey wouldn’t interrupt.

He didn’t.

“You don’t live ‘round here, do you?”

“I just moved,” she said. “What’s your name?”

“Yusef,” he said. “You get your food already?”

“Yeah,” she replied. “Me and my bruva waitin’.”

Yusef dug into the tight-fitting shorts of his New York Knicks short set and dug out a thick knot of cash. “This time it’s on me.”

“No it ain’t, muthafucka!” another voice yelled from behind.

A tall boy about Trey’s age walked in with three other boys behind him. They were all wearing Golden State Warrior jerseys with matching blue jeans with yellow rags in their left back pockets.

Yusef turned around to the face them, standing firm. “Who you talkin’ to, nigga?”

Trey looked behind the counter to see Scharff standing frozen back by the kitchen, the bag with Trey and Nichelle’s patties clutched in his hand.

“That’s *my* money in yo’ pocket!”

“How you figure that?” Yusef asked.

“Cuz you standin’ on *my* block in *my* neighborhood. You can’t be boostin’ rides on my block and not pay tribute. So why don’t you just hand that knot over?”

Trey tried to pull Nichelle closer to him, but she wouldn’t budge.

“Take it outside!” Scharff yelled. “We no want a-roughneck business in me store!”

But it was too late.

Yusef hit the leader square in the face, and the two began to trade blows. Yusef had a longer reach and was keeping the other boy at bay when the smallest of the three Warriors pulled an empty pint whiskey bottle from his left rear pocket and smashed it against Yusef’s head.

Yusef went down like a chopped tree, blood pouring from his skull.

The leader wiped the blood from his lip with his thumb and licked it. Then he pulled the money out of Yusef’s shorts and strolled out while the other boys flanked him like the Secret Service as he hit the sidewalk out front.

There was a pool of blood under Yusef’s head as he rolled around on the floor.

Just when Trey thought they were gone, the leader poked his head back into the store entrance and looked Trey dead in the face, glancing over at Nichelle.

“She yo’ sister?” he asked.

Trey tightened his fists, pretending that he wasn’t afraid. He nodded.

“Keep her away from that nigga right there,” pointing to the bleeding Yusef on the floor. “He bad news.”

“Call an ambulance!” Scharff yelled, thawing out now that the Warriors had left the place. He dropped the bag of patties and the two sodas

on the counter and then slapped his hand on the linoleum to get Trey and Nichelle's attention.

"Take the food and you a-go! No a-git in dis business!"

Trey grabbed the food with one hand and Nichelle by the wrist and they shuffled out.

"What was all that about?" Nichelle asked as they headed back toward Grandma Abbey's. "I kinda liked Yusef. He was cute."

Trey just shook his head.

When they came back through Grandma Abbey's front door, Shalayna was gone without a trace. Grandma Abbey was sitting in her recliner, finishing the last of her coffee. A second mug sat on the coffee table, still steaming.

"You two come on in here," Grandma Abbey said, rubbing an ache in her left knee.

Trey and Nichelle sat down on the couch across from her. When Trey peered down into the second cup, he could see that it was half empty.

"Ma gone?" Trey asked.

Grandma Abbey gave him a vacant nod. "And she will be for a while. You two are gonna stay here."

"But what about our clothes? What about our friends?" Nichelle whined.

"Harlem ain't long distance, baby girl. And your friends are old enough to take the train if they wanna see you. As for your things, we'll get them for you. But you and your brother are *not* going back to that house."

"Then how come Mama left us?" Nichelle asked.

"Because she too sick to see straight. And when you blind, you can't see what you doin' to your children. That's why you'll be here—cuz I ain't blind. And it's about time you two went to school *every* day. I know you been cutting up there."

Grandma Abbey gave Trey a wink. He wondered how she knew.

"It won't be so bad, y'all," the old woman said as she climbed to her feet. "You'll just have to learn how to live by *my* rules."

## MURRAN

And the rules were simple. If you didn't cook, you cleaned. If your knees were still good, you took out the garbage. You came home by six during school time and eight in the summer. You did your homework. No foolishness and no backtalk. If they could do those things, then their lives would be "all love." Either way it was love, but the good kind felt a lot better than the other kind.



## CHAPTER EIGHT

**Y**ou goin' to the parade?" T from across the street asked one day as Trey and Nichelle were going back into Grandma Abbey's building.

T lived with his mother on the top floor and had an old Atari 2600 and only one cartridge, *Donkey Kong*, which he played so much the game shouldn't have worked. "What parade?" Trey asked.

"I *know* you ain't say dat?" T snickered. The two other boys on the stoop laughed out loud. "You really is from Upstate!"

Trey didn't see what was so funny, but he also didn't take offense.

"The West Indian Day Parade, man," T explained. "The best party of the summer."

T explained that the West Indian Day Parade had started out in Harlem back in the 60s when people from the Caribbean started to move up to New York from the islands. Somehow the police had their permit revoked, so the event moved to Brooklyn.

The parade was the final part of a two-day event that started down at the edge of Prospect Park, where they had the "Juve," an outdoor party where music played and people danced as the floats were lined up for the parade the next morning. The parade traveled from that edge of the park up to Eastern Parkway and then all the way down to Grand Army Plaza where Eastern Parkway met with Flatbush Avenue in an area that was called Park Slope.

All the black people in Brooklyn came out to see the ladies in their carnival costumes and hear the reggae, soca, and dancehall music blaring from the floats as they cruised through the borough.

“My Grandma ain’t lettin’ me out for nuthin’ late at night,” Trey had explained to T.

“I hear ‘dat. My moms don’t let me go nowhere neither. But you gotta come to the parade. It’s during the day, and it’s educational. My moms is from Trinidad, and it’s the one thing we go to together because she always misses home, even though we been here all my life.”

T explained that in Trinidad they had this meal called a *roti*, which was either meat or fish rolled up in bread, and you ate it like a Mexican burrito. He said they would have them at the parade. That alone was a delicious enough reason for them all to go.

Grandma Abbey gave Trey and Nichelle permission to go to the parade, but they couldn’t leave the corner of Nostrand and Eastern Parkway, which was a straight walk down the avenue from her apartment. If anything happened to them, they were to use a payphone, and she could walk up and find them easily.

Trey and Nichelle thought Grandma was treating them like little kids; but once they got there, Trey more than understood. They were supposed to meet T and his mother on the same corner where Grandma Abbey had told them to stay; but when they got close to the area, they saw that the *entire* street was flooded with excited people waving flags and yelling at the top of their lungs as the floats went past.

The women wore one and two-piece leotards and bikinis covered in glitter and shiny fabric, and they marched in front of the floats representing various countries and social clubs. Some were dancing on top of the floats, shaking their ample breasts and asses to music that Trey and Nichelle had never heard before.

Vendors moved through the crowds selling everything from sliced mango in plastic cups to coconuts with straws in them. There was also dried fruit, nuts, and candy tied up in small plastic baggies. On the sidelines were stands set up by various local Caribbean restaurants. You could get a plate piled high with jerk chicken or roti or current goat for just a dollar.

As each float went by, people waved flags from their countries: Jamaica, Trinidad, Barbados, the Bahamas, Haiti, St. Lucia, St. Kitts, and

what seemed like a million other flags as well. Some wore bandannas or twirled t-shirts in their country's colors. Some had even painted their country's flags on their bodies.

It was beautiful to watch. Away from the home they had know, and with his father dead, Trey wanted a flag—a country of his own. But in that crowd, he was just a Black American. Then and there, that didn't seem to count for much.

Nichelle stepped out in front of her brother and practiced dancing like the girls and women she saw on the passing floats. Different boys got behind her and tried to dance with her; but each time, she would back against Trey so that he could give them a look that would make sure they left her alone.

She loved her brother for always being there for her, even though she didn't say it enough. She always felt safe when she was with him.

When the parade finally ended late in the afternoon, each and every street was like a clogged artery. They were so many people they couldn't move a step or two without bumping into somebody. So Trey got the idea to walk west, all the way over to Washington Avenue, then come to down to Fulton, then go down Bedford and cut over to Nostrand. It was a longer walk, but the streets would be empty.

They got to Washington and then turned onto Fulton. But Nichelle made Trey stop at the small park just after Grand Avenue. It was deserted.

The jelly sandals Nichelle had worn weren't meant for this much walking.

It wasn't dark yet, but the sun was going down.

"Hey!" Trey heard a voice say behind them.

He spun around to see two boys in their late teens approaching. Both were taller than Trey. One was the color of a Hershey bar with a scraggly beard and a tight pair of Jordache jeans with a Black Adidas hoodie that showed the outline of a well-defined physique underneath.

The other was a heavy-set white boy, either Irish or Italian, with an acne-covered face that even Clearasil couldn't fix. He wore a black

motorcycle jacket covered with studs. A pair of torn denim pants and a heavy pair of combat boots completed the threatening picture.

Trey noticed a heavy chain hanging from the white boy's pocket that led to something bulky inside his left pants pocket.

"We don't know you," the black boy said in a belligerent tone, squinting under a purplish black eye.

"This is *our* park," the white boy added.

Trey stood his ground, ready to square up if it was time for a fight. The problem was that there were two of them.

"We'll move man," Trey explained, still trying to keep the peace. "We just came from the parade. My sista's feet was hurtin'."

"That ain't all that's gonna hurt on her," the black boy said.

The hairs stood up on the back of Trey's neck. He knew what was coming, and there was no way out of it. He could feel the fear all over his little sister without turning his head.

"We'll break out," Trey said.

He turned and reached for his sister's hand to leave when he suddenly felt a sharp pain in the back of his head. Trey was on his knees a moment later, his skull throbbing in pain.

Then he heard Nichelle scream.

Trey looked over and saw the tall black boy had pinned his sister down on the asphalt. He shook the cobwebs from his head and tried to get to his feet, but he didn't get far. An arm wrapped around his neck, and a glint of bright metal flashed in front of his eyes.

It was a knife with a thick handle, and the white boy was holding it right in front of Trey's face. It had been the blunt handle that had come down on the back of his head, giving him the roaring headache.

"Move and I'll put this through your back, lil' nigga."

Trey looked over at his sister. The black boy was leering down at her, one hand on her throat, the other, a clenched fist hovering over her.

The black boy, satisfied with Nichelle's terror, turned, grinned, and nodded at his white partner, who nodded back with approval.

Nichelle looked over at Trey, her eyes pleading for him to do something.

Trey tried to get himself free, but the boy had him in both strength and build as he pressed the point of the blade against Trey's back.

"Get up!" the white boy barked.

"Leave her alone," Trey mumbled through his pain as he reluctantly got to his feet.

The pepperoni-faced kid slapped Trey across the back of his head. "Now take off your belt," he instructed, jabbing the tip of the knife into Trey's ribs.

"What? Why?"

"Take it off!" he hissed with foul smelling breath. "And give it to me."

Trey threaded it through his jeans and handed over his thin leather belt, its surface cracked from overuse.

The white boy backed Trey into the elm tree just inside of the park fence, the only living thing on the large expanse of asphalt. His body slammed against the rough bark. "Now don't move," he growled.

The punk forced Trey into a sitting position, took the belt, and tied it around Trey's neck and the tree.

Trey could hear his sister whimpering—then scream.

"Help! Somebody help me!" she yelled. Trey tried to unhook the belt but he couldn't get enough leverage. Any move he made only made his restraint tighter. And even worse, it was beginning to cut off his air supply.

"Stop! Please stop!" Trey pleaded, forced to watch the brutal scene playing out in front of his eyes.

The white boy made his way over to Nichelle, knelt down and held her arms tightly above her head while his black homeboy on top of her pointed a folding thin blade at Nichelle's throat.

"I'll kill you if you scream again, bitch!" he snarled.

Nichelle saw the lust in his eyes. She was deeply afraid of what was going to happen next.

"Touch my sister and I'll kill you!" Trey cried out, even surprising himself with the words.

Seated on his ass with his neck tied to the tree, there was nothing else he could do but watch the horrible scene unfold.

Nichelle felt the full weight of the black boy pressing against her torso and she started to cry. A rough hand clapped across her mouth to silence her.

She looked up at the displaced anger in her assailant's dark eyes as they bore into her with a disturbing combination of lewdness and excitement. Her body began to tremble as he grabbed her roughly by the nape of the neck, his knife-held hand over her mouth the entire time. She gasped for air while still fighting against the crushing weight pressing down on her small body.

The black boy placed his mouth down beside her ear and whispered in a raspy, lust-filled voice. "I'll kill you if you scream, bitch. And I'll kill him too," he said, pointing the knife at Trey before returning it to her.

Nichelle struggled against the punks holding her down while her attacker's hand roamed freely over her young body, groping her large breasts and sliding his hand down her stomach, over her hips and crotch, then between the denim shorts covering her privates.

Tears came to her eyes, and she went into a daze hearing Trey's curses and pleading cries some place far off.

"Hold still, bitch," he whispered.

"She's got a pretty mouth," the white boy said, staring down above her, a line of spittle crawling out the side of his mouth. "Give it to her man," his partner cried hungrily.

"Then it's *my* turn."

With her eyes closed, she heard the sound of a zipper coming down. She knew what was coming next. Then she felt the warm, stale musk wafting up against her face from his crotch.

Tears welled up in her eyes and she accepted the inevitable.

Then the weight of her assailant lifted off of her completely. In a split second, the beast was yanked straight up and tossed aside like some rag doll.

"*Was it Trey?*" Nichelle thought to herself.

Nichelle looked above her head just as the white punk's grip released her arms. Confused and frightened, her view was filled by the face of a fair-skinned black mixed boy with rust-colored hair under a Golden State Warriors cap.

Nichelle was so stiff with fear that she thought the boy was another attacker waiting to take his turn.

"Are you OK?" the boy, Darrell Johnson, asked, looking her over for signs of injury.

There was a scuffle to her left, and she saw the would-be rapists getting their asses beat by three younger black boys with what looked like sawed-off broom handles, the kind of 'bats' she used to see boys using to play stickball back in Harlem.

A few moments later, the thugs, now battered and bloodied, took off east back toward Brownsville.

"I said, are you OK?" Darrell asked again.

Nichelle was about to answer when Trey appeared above her. "Nichelle," he said, pleadingly. "Are you OK? Are you hurt?"

Her eyes went from the boy standing who'd saved her to Trey, and then back to the mixed boy.

"Thank you," she sobbed as Darrell pulled her to her feet. She wiped her eyes with her hands and stood there silently for a moment, still trying to get her bearings.

Trey pulled Nichelle under his arm.

Darrell gave her a long look, sizing her up. He was about to speak when Trey interrupted him.

"Who are you?" Trey asked.

"You a long way from home, nigga," Darrell answered, turning on Trey. "Whatcha doin' over here?"

"We *live* here now," Nichelle answered for him.

"Down the street," Trey added right on time. "With our grandmother." Then asked, "Who were dem niggas?"

"Muthafuckas you won't be seeing again," Darrell said plainly. "They think they can come into our hood with this kinda shit? I don't think so."

“Yeah,” one of the other boys replied, a dark-skinned chubby kid named Shorty. He had round, limpid eyes, and he was wearing a blue and yellow Golden State hoodie. “We gave ‘em the bum rush!” Shorty said excitedly.

Darrell grinned at the chubby homeboy.

“We were ballin’ over on the court across the street and saw them come into the park,” Darrell continued while the other three boys twirled their broom handles in their hands. “We have to remind them now and then that this is *our* turf, especially on a parade day! Good thing we had our bats on us.”

“So...what y’all doin’ here?” Darrell asked again, as if their first explanation hadn’t been adequate.

“They ain’t wit’ nobody I ever seen,” Georgie growled.

Trey looked over at the medium-build boy who had yet to speak. He was wearing his Warriors cap to the side over a closely trimmed Afro. The name “Georgie” was chicken-scratch tattooed on a forearm that hung over a stomach so fat that it jiggled when he spoke.

“They don’t belong here, word,” the last of the three barked. He was a stick figure of a boy—tall, dark, and lanky. He wore a black pork pie hat—like the one Popeye Doyle wore in the movie *The French Connection*—atop a neatly cropped head of thick, curly hair. He looked to be the oldest in the group. “Let’s send them back to where they came from,” he continued, fingering a yellow piece of cloth in his right pants pocket.

“Word, Popeye,” Georgie said in agreement.

Trey stiffened.

Georgie joined Popeye as they approached the brother and sister menacingly. Georgie was grabbing for Nichelle’s arm when Darrell ordered, “Hold up! They ain’t start nuthin. Let ‘em go home.”

Darrell swaggered up to Trey. “Go. Take your sister home. But don’t let us see you around here no more.”

It was only then that Trey recognized the group from the fight in the patty shop. This time they weren’t wearing their jackets. Trey nodded, snatched his sister by the arm, and rushed the both of them south down Franklin and back toward their grandmother’s place.

As they left, Nichelle flashed Darrell a parting smile.

Trey and Nichelle walked home with Trey wrapping an arm around his sister's shoulders. "Are you OK?" he asked.

Nichelle leaned in closer with a tear in her eye. "Fuckers are always looking at me everywhere I go. Sometimes it's nice, but they've never..."

"They ain't gonna do it again. I promise. I ain't gonna let it happen again."

"What are you gonna do? What can we even do?"

"It just ain't gonna happen again."

As they walked back to Grandma Abbey's flat, Trey figured he could stay away from the gang that had just saved them. He'd had pretty good luck avoiding the crews in Harlem when he was playing hooky, so this shouldn't be any different.

It was.



When Nichelle returned to Grandma Abbey's apartment with Trey in tow, she immediately ran to the bathroom. Trey ran interference by helping his grandmother prepare dinner. Trey and Nichelle thought it best not to say anything to Grandma Abbey about what had happened at the playground.

When Nichelle hit the bathroom, she stripped, turned on the shower, and stepped in. She turned up the heat until the water was almost scalding, then let the hot soothing water run over her body.

She spent almost an hour scrubbing the stench and sweat of those animals off her skin, out of her nose, and out of her mind. She then went to her Grandma's bedroom, pulled the sheets back, crawled under the thick, warm comforter, and was soon fast asleep.

Trey told Grandma Abbey that Nichelle was tired, but any woman would have known different.



## CHAPTER NINE

**P**ut your clothes on and come out here and eat!” Grandma Abbey had yelled outside of their closed bedrooms. Both the brother and sister took their time getting out of bed.

Trey put on the clothes he had worn the day before—a pair of well-worn blue jeans and a dingy yellow t-shirt. As an afterthought, he stuck the red handkerchief his father gave him into his back pocket.

Nichelle came out of the bathroom wearing a pair of blue jeans and a cream-colored Guess t-shirt that hugged her shapely young body.

“I’ll call your mother today and have her bring some of your clothes over,” Grandma Abbey said after seeing Trey’s outfit. “Can’t have you going to school looking like a hobo. Now go on, eat up!” she commanded, pointing to the plates of pancakes and scrambled eggs that she had prepared for them. “You both have a big day today. You need to register for your new school.”

Trey and his sister gave each other knowing looks. School was *not* going to be in *their* plans for the day. But they just nodded at their grandmother as if that was the plan and enjoyed her excellent breakfast.

When they finished, they got up to leave and explore the neighborhood as they did over the weekend. But they found that they were in for a surprise.

Grandma Abbey was waiting for them at the front door with cane and purse in hand, wearing a multi-colored scarf around her neck.

“And you two remember there ain’t no playin’ hooky in this house,” she said firmly. “And you’re about to be late!”

Trey and Nichelle let out deep simultaneous sighs as their grandma led them out of her apartment to the Boys and Girls High School on

Fulton Street. As they approached the imposing three-story red brick structure with its many windows, Trey saw clearly that skipping school and not getting caught would be close to impossible with Grandma in tow. She was the only one with the key to the mailbox and was home all day. So if the school called or the truant cops came by, she'd be there front and center, waiting to get the news.

They didn't like it; but at least with Grandma Abbey, there would always be food to eat, clean clothes to wear, and pillows under their heads. Even to them, that meant more than running the streets all day. But this was still a neighborhood they didn't know. And as they'd learned, it came with some new dangers.

They climbed the tall stoop leading to a glass and metal double-door entrance. From there, Grandma Abbey led them to the school office where she had them take a seat on the wooden bench next to a vertically-arranged row of "in" and "out" boxes opposite the grimy glass door leading to the registrar.

While they waited, an intermittent stream of young boys and girls passed by on their way to the principal's office down the hall. None of them looked particularly happy. Trey could only wonder what they'd done to have to make that trip.

Trey and Nichelle fidgeted under the cold stare of a tall, painted-faced secretary with short, dark hair with auburn highlights, tarantula-covered eyes, and long skeletal fingers that pecked at a typewriter like birds at a crust of bread. After every few keystrokes, the withered woman would look up and send a cold gaze in their direction that gave both of them the willies.

After almost an hour, Grandma Abbey finally reappeared from the assistant principal's office with a short, balding man wearing wire-rimmed glasses over red-blotched, pasty skin. "These are my grandchildren," Grandma Abbey said. "Children, this is Mr. Andrews."

The two gave him a dispassionate nod.

"Nice to meet you," Andrews said, scratching a small mole on his face. "I hope you will both be happy here at Boys and Girls."

“I explained to Mr. Andrews that *I* am responsible for you now,” Grandma Abbey added. “And that you are *expected* to be here at school *every* school day. If you don’t show up for class, he’ll be calling me immediately.”

Trey and Nichelle’s faces sunk toward the floor.

“I’ll have Mrs. Beck escort you to your classes,” Andrews said politely.

Mrs. Beck, a matronly-looking lady with long graying hair and a flowered purple and blue Mumu, stood up from behind her desk and motioned for the children to follow her.

“Make sure Trey and Nichelle have a notebook and several pencils,” Andrews said to Mrs. Beck. “They can pick up their textbooks in each class.”

The school bell buzzed with a loud clang, signaling the change of classes. For Trey, it could just as well have been the sound of a cellblock door closing behind him.

In Harlem, he’d had school pretty much figured out. It was hard for him to sit like a prisoner behind a cramped wooden desk listening to a teacher spout things that he wasn’t interested in and seemed so foreign to his life.

Teachers were always making him do things or complaining about something trivial he’d done. When he sat with his head on his desk, nearly asleep, the teacher would come around, scream in his ear, kick his foot, or give him a shove to make him pay attention. Now he was forced to spend his hours locked up with no escape and nothing to do—except learn.

The halls and stairwells were teeming with bodies as young boys and girls pushed and shoved their way through the crowd to their next class. Trey even saw a punch or two thrown between students while a few others pulled them apart. Mrs. Beck ignored the incident as if it happened every day.

Suddenly, a large woman came tearing down the stairwell, almost bowling him and Nichelle over in hot pursuit of a Puerto Rican boy

leaping three steps at a time to get away from her. Their guide took little notice.

Mrs. Beck took Nichelle first to her class for that period—Home Economics with Ms. Turner—which was on the second floor. She led Trey to the third floor hallway entrance. “Since you’re a junior, most of your classes will be up here,” she informed him.

She pointed to a door and motioned for him to go in. “Have a nice day,” she chirped.

Trey knew he wouldn’t.

His first class was English, but the teacher hadn’t come in yet so he took a seat in the back, hoping to draw less attention to himself. The second bell rang, signaling the beginning of class, but the teacher had yet to appear. The room, full of about three dozen teenagers, overflowed with chatter while they waited for the teacher to appear.

A boy and a girl, both wearing the same blue *Le coq sportif* t-shirt and track pants tried to start a conversation with him. Trey assumed that they were either a couple or a twin brother and sister.

“You new? I ain’t seen you before,” the boy asked, picking his small Afro with the pick end of his little comb.

“Did you transfer from Bishop Loughlin?” the girl asked. She was brown-skinned with a dusting of freckles around her nose that matched her naturally red hair.

Trey ignored both of them. He wasn’t interested in making friends. He was still trying to get his bearings in Brooklyn, especially with what had happened to Nichelle. It made him feel even more powerless than when Marcus had almost killed him. He didn’t want to get bailed out by a bunch of punks in Starter coats again. He had to do something, but he wasn’t sure what.

A few minutes later, a tall, dark, lanky man entered the classroom. He had an air of natural sophistication and self-confidence about him, even though his tweed sport coat was slightly frayed at the shoulder.

He stood in front of the class, commanding everyone’s attention without a word.

“How is everyone today?” the teacher said in a clipped English accent.

Trey had never heard a black man talk like that before except on Ready for the World’s “Oh Sheila.”

Trey leaned over his desk to the chubby Dominican kid seated in front of him.

“He doesn’t talk like an American,” Trey whispered.

“Mr. Jackson’s not,” the boy murmured back in thick Dominican English. “From somewhere in Africa. He told us he went to school in England or somethin’. That’s why he talk like dat.”

There were a variety of responses across the room to Jackson’s question, most of them familiar and general. But when Jackson saw Trey, he stopped short.

“I see we have a new junior,” he said, pointing at Trey, who had slumped in his chair.

“Please introduce yourself,” Jackson said.

All eyes were on Trey. He stood up reluctantly, wishing he had stayed out of the spotlight.

“My name’s Trey,” he mumbled. “And me and my sister moved down here from Harlem.”

“Fuck Harlem!” someone yelled, their face hidden in the sea of people. There were a few chuckles, but most of the class kept their attention focused on Trey and the teacher.

“Happy to have you with us, Trey,” Jackson grinned, enunciating perfectly.

“This term, we’re going to be looking at some more modern periods in literature than we did last term,” he explained.

Trey continued to appraise the tall, lean man with the elegant muscular features during class. His small Afro was perfectly shaped up in both front and back, and he wore a close-cropped beard over his face. He had never met a black man who spoke so eloquently. But after a while, the teacher’s voice receded from Trey’s mind, and it wandered to more interesting thoughts.



## CHAPTER TEN

The school bell let out a loud clang that shook Trey back to reality. He headed out to his last class, U.S. History, where he met Eldridge Armstead.

Trey took a seat in the back of the class, ready for what he thought would be another boring 45 minutes. But once Armstead entered the room, he soon realized that this was not going to be a normal class lesson. Like Jackson, Armstead was no ordinary teacher.

Armstead was a tall, steel-black, buff man in his early thirties with short, graying hair over a set of jet-black eyes that demanded you believe in whatever came out of his mouth.

“I’ve brought something for you.”

Armstead reached into his bag and removed a thick stack of photocopied handouts. It was an excerpt from a speech by Henry Highland Garnett, a minister and abolitionist involved in the anti-slavery movements.

As Trey read the handout along with the rest of the class, he was taken back over one hundred years to the times when people his color were burned and killed for disobedience, forced to witness their families mutilated, and made to work for others for free.

Armstead pointed to a stocky, well-toned black teen named Denzel—a Q-tip-like Afro encompassing his round head. “Has the Black Man progressed since being freed by the Civil War?”

“Just a few short decades ago,” Denzel replied, standing at attention, “it was acceptable to lynch a black man by hanging him from a tree.”

“And now?” Armstead asked. “Tell me. How does the White Man lynch black people today?”

*Lynch?*

Denzel was quick to respond from rote memory. He had learned his lessons from Armstead well. “Whites destroy us by crowding us into ghettos and letting filth and despair put the final touches on our execution.”

“Correct!” Armstead bellowed. “In our white-dominated society, the Black Man has been defined as evil and must be kept down. We see this suppression every day, in every black neighborhood, in every black family, in every black child.”

He turned and walked back to the front of his desk. “The African American is still a slave, still in bondage.”

Trey followed the rest of the lesson with rapt attention. Armstead’s words had appealed to Trey in a deeper way than school usually did. This was not the kind of history he was accustomed to learning in school, so he listened intently. This was the one class he couldn’t day-dream through.

When class was over, he approached Armstead. “What you said about the Black Man still being a slave—I just don’t...I mean, I never...I don’t understand.”

“Are you not aware,” Armstead said in a strong voice, “that you are the inheritor of the teachings of Malcolm X and the courage of Martin Luther King? Do you know who those men were?”

“I guess. I mean I heard of Martin Luther King.”

Armstead snorted as he stood, towering over Trey, his eyes burning into him like some mad African god.

“One man freed our bodies—the other freed our minds. The Black Man had no power until Malcolm X taught us about *taking* power—Black power. Power over our lives. Power over our community. Power over the streets. Black pride in being African and the creation of Black politics and the practice of our culture as Africans.”

He paused for effect.

“It would be best that you, as a young African American, hold and execute these values. Do you understand?”

Then Armstead’s voice turned paternal.

“And be a true Black Man—not like your English teacher,” he scowled.

Trey was puzzled. “Mr. Jackson?”

“Yes. He’s what we call an Oreo,” Armstead replied derisively. “Black on the outside, white on the inside. He doesn’t hold true to our African beliefs.”

Armstead paused to see the effect of what he’d said on Trey, who had yet to fully grasp the concept.

“You’ll see what I mean.”

Then the bell buzzed once again. His first day at Boys and Girls was finally over.