

## CHAPTER ONE

*POP! POP-POP!*

As several shots rang out, I crouched behind a dumpster. Then I glanced behind me and caught Black Sean's eye. What were we doing in the middle of a shoot-out? This was serious stuff, not exactly what I'd expected when Black Sean had approached me earlier in school.

"Hey," Black Sean had said, grinning. My eyes focused on the serious gold jewelry around his neck. "Wanna go get some money?"

He didn't have to ask twice. I followed him without a backward glance. We caught a city bus at the corner and got off at a stop in South Jamaica, Queens, where we spotted Jamal, a kid I knew to be a drug hustler.

"Hey, come on," Jamal called, moving down the sidewalk in a hurry. "We gotta go."

Black Sean and I didn't know what was happening, but the

excitement in Jamal's voice sent a surge of adrenaline through my bloodstream. A couple of other guys joined us for whatever was going down. Then Jamal crouched behind a dumpster in an alley and peered around the corner. What was he doing? Were we in the middle of some kind of drug deal, or what?

Before I even realized Jamal was carrying, he pulled out a gun, held it in both hands, and started shooting at a guy across the street. What?

Instinct had told me to duck, so I crouched behind Jamal. My heart pounded. I barely had time to think before he yelled, "Let's go," so off we went.

I glanced over my shoulder, looking for a body in the street, but I didn't see one. Good. I wanted no part of killing.

Next thing I knew I was standing with Jamal, Black Sean, and some other guys. A dealer named Abdul stood with us, and he grinned at Jamal. "Way to go," he said. Then he looked at Black Sean and gestured in my direction. "Who's this guy?"

Black Sean looked at me. "Slim."

"You wanna deal, Slim?" Abdul asked me.

Of course I did. Dealing meant money, and money meant everything on the street. Abdul must have figured that if I had the courage to run with Jamal, I had what it took to be a dealer.

I nodded, and Abdul grinned.

"Give 'im a package," he said to one of the other guys. Then he narrowed his eyes at me. "This is how it works—you don't sell to nobody you don't know. You keep the stuff hidden, you take the money, and then you go get a capsule and hand it over. If you follow my rules, you'll be okay." His smile broadened. "Be smart, dude, and you'll be cool."

He walked away, and another kid handed me a bag of crack cocaine. Then I grinned at Black Sean.

I felt the weight of the drug bag in my hand.

It was a lot lighter than my schoolbooks.

Ever since I'd been old enough to recognize the signs of success, I'd wanted to be a dealer. And there I stood among dudes with guns, attitude, and a supplier. I was on my way . . . and I was only fourteen years old.

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A couple of months later I found myself lying on the sidewalk with blood gushing from my head. I felt the roughness of concrete beneath my hands and heard a throbbing in my ears. What had happened this time?

I pushed myself up to a sitting position. A group of my friends stood around me, but most of them were silent and still.

Jamal came over and glared at me. "Yo, you stupid, son. Why would you mess around with Abdul's money, trying to flip it? You dumb stupid, you ought to be happy you ain't gettin' capped."

I pressed my hand to my head and felt a swelling lump over my temple. "How'd my head get like this?"

Jamal's mouth twisted in a smirk. "Abdul smashed his phone into your skull till it exploded and then stomped his boots on your head."

I ran my hand over my jaw, which felt swollen, and tasted the metallic tang of blood mixed with dirt—*dirt?* Oh yeah, Abdul had tried to kick out my teeth once I was down. As my boss, he'd felt it his duty to administer a little discipline to a wayward worker.

Somehow I managed to stumble into a Korean grocery store, where someone finally looked at me with compassion. The owner hooked me up with some rubbing alcohol and a pack of Band-Aids so I could clean my wounds. As I braced myself for the alcohol burn, I realized I might have to patch the Band-Aids together to stop the bleeding.

I finished with the bandages and, without skipping a beat, went right back to hustling. I walked out of the store and yelled at anyone

who looked like a potential customer. “I’ve got the good stuff here. Don’t go to Jamal—his crack is whack. I’ve got the good stuff right here.”

People stopped—they always did. After looking at the crazy patchwork on my head and face, a couple of my faithful customers summoned up the courage to ask what had happened.

I said what everyone in my condition said: “Don’t sweat it. Man, this is just part of the business.”

And it was . . . yet it wasn’t. Everyone in the life I’d chosen got beat up; beatings were part of the game. But unlike the vast majority of other kids my age who were hustling, I wasn’t content to be *just* a drug dealer. I wanted to be a kingpin, a boss, a street *god*, so I was constantly looking for ways to broaden my scope and increase my profit. By doing that, I was asking for more trouble. This time I had taken Abdul’s money, purchased additional drugs, and made a sweet personal profit for myself even though I knew that “flipping” was an offense that drug bosses dealt with quickly and furiously, lest others wise up to the same idea.

Drug bosses were abusive by nature. If they wanted to survive for any length of time, they had to develop reputations for toughness or they’d face challenges from other bosses who wanted to take their turf. Most of us realized that the infighting among a guy’s crew wasn’t personal; it was simply part of the business. It wasn’t unusual to take a beating and later on smoke a blunt with the guy who had just opened up a can of whiptail on you.

I knew I made a lot of money for Abdul, so I expected him to chill out for a while and then come back to reassure me that I was a valuable worker. He needed to lock in my loyalty in case I was ever busted. A drug boss needed to be able to count on his workers and know they wouldn’t rat out the operation if arrested.

Only a few minutes after I’d gone back to the block, I watched Black Sean come limping around the corner with his expensive

Adidas shirt ripped in two. In his wake trailed an unmarked police car with two detectives, who made sure we saw them pointing us out.

My heart nearly leaped out of my chest. Black Sean yelled and cussed at the cops as blood poured out of his mouth—at fourteen, he was already a loose cannon. Once the police car moved on down the street, he turned to fill us in. He said the cops had jacked him up. They'd rolled up on him and asked how he could afford a hundred-dollar Adidas shirt. Then they had cuffed him, made him get in the back of their car, and beaten him up, ripping his shirt in the process.

“Be cool,” I told him. “This is all part of the life.”

We hustlers got it from all sides. Cops routinely picked us up and beat us, and sometimes they even stripped us down in the street. They hated our operation because it was almost impenetrable. We were disciplined enough not to sell to anyone we didn't know, a strategy that made it difficult for cops to catch us on a simple buy-and-bust. The drugs stayed in our possession only for a minute—just long enough for us to retrieve a packet from a hiding place and hand it to our customer.

We'd all become experts at swallowing small plastic capsules of crack whenever a cop pulled up in the middle of a sale. And our bosses—the guys who gave us the drugs and told us where to sell—rarely handled drugs on the street. Decked out with the flyest gold chains and gear, they'd roll onto the scene and flash their fancy cars and hot girlfriends. Their job was to intimidate and discipline, not to sell.

I expected Abdul to come find me after my beating, and about an hour after Black Sean's run-in with the cops, Abdul pulled up in his car and opened the door. “Slim, get in.”

Being invited into Abdul's black Suzuki Samurai was a bigger perk than I had expected. The car had been pimped out to win admiration from and strike fear into the man's employees. Those big fat tires reminded us that he could roll over us if he wanted to, and the bright

chrome trim reminded us that he would always draw more respect than we underlings. And the sound system—we could feel the *boom boom* of the bass while the car was a block away, and our bodies vibrated with every beat. That car had been designed to intimidate, and it fulfilled its purpose very well.

Yet I was grateful for the invitation to climb into the vehicle with Abdul. To everyone watching, that invitation meant not only that he wanted to keep me on his team but also that he thought I was cool enough to hang out with for a while. Riding in a drug dealer's car earned me major props, or proper respect.

"You know," Abdul said, handling the car as if it needed to be taught a lesson, "I can't have you playing with my money and flip-pin' it."

I nodded and kept my eyes on the road ahead.

"But hey—you do good and one day you can be a boss like me. And when that happens, you gonna have to keep your hustlers in line. You gonna have to bust some heads. It's business, man."

Abdul was full of it, deceiving me with every word. He was trying to gas me up enough to believe I could be the next boss on his team, but he wasn't fooling me. Though he was the boss of my crew, he worked for the Supreme Team, a vicious operation. Abdul was simply a franchisee of Fat Cat, Supreme, and James Corley, a notorious trifecta that ran operations in half of South Jamaica, Queens, at the height of the crack business. And me? I wasn't even close to being a lieutenant on his team.

I sat and listened, pretending to heed his advice, but that beating must have knocked some sense into my head. After getting out of the car, I realized I was finished working for that abusive psycho—I'd had enough. The only way an ambitious guy like me could reach the top of that particular organization would be through murdering people, and murder wasn't my style. My chosen street name was Daylight, not Nightmare.

Black Sean lived and breathed South Jamaica, but I'd come from a different background. My mother was a sophisticated, intelligent woman who worked as an elementary school principal, and my father was a former Air Force man who served as a captain of corrections on Rikers Island. Though we weren't wealthy, my roots were middle class, so my worldview was vastly different from most of the hustlers on the street.

I counted myself fortunate to have grown up in Cambria Heights, a community of homeowners, manicured lawns, and few, if any, welfare recipients. But even though my neighborhood was composed of upper-middle-class families, it wasn't immune from the allure of mind-altering drugs. As in all "good" communities, people used drugs.

By the time I was eleven, I was peddling mescaline tablets in middle school. Like anyone intent on being successful, I wanted to diversify my inventory and be a well-rounded player in the game. By fourteen, I had an advanced knowledge of the drug trade and knew what it would take to rise to the top. I also had drive and ambition. Even at that age, I wanted to be a boss, the most powerful player in the game—a street god.

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Neither my father nor my mother wanted to raise a drug dealer. Though they never married (they spoke of themselves as "separated"), they both played an active role in my life. Dad, a strong and handsome Puerto Rican, worked at Rikers Island until he retired. He had a strong work ethic and tried to pass it on to me, even buying me a hot dog stand when I turned twelve.

Like many fathers, Dad would pick me up every Saturday and take me to places he thought I ought to visit. He was a visionary. He wanted me to be smart, so he enrolled me in memorization classes. He wanted me to be confident, so he enrolled me in karate class. He wanted me to be skilled, so he signed me up for wood shop. He wanted me to be

multicultural, so he paid for tennis lessons and placed me in situations where I mixed with white, Asian, and Hispanic kids. My father lived in a diverse world, and he wanted me to share it.

We never finished those classes or perfected those skills, but by the time I'd lost interest in one activity, he'd come up with some other program he wanted me to try. He also taught me by example—how to greet people, how to repeat their names after meeting them so I'd remember them. I didn't realize it at the time, but I was picking up skills that would serve me well over the years.

My mother's world, on the other hand, was almost completely African American. I lived with her in a middle-class house on a nice street in Cambria Heights, home to lawyers and city leaders and officials. My mother was married when she had her first three children—my siblings Dawn, Emerald, and Chad—all by her husband. They divorced, and many years later, she met my father and I was born. On our street, all the families but mine and one other had mothers *and* fathers. I felt the difference keenly.

Cambria Heights was definitely not the ghetto; but every area has an underbelly, and Queens had a flourishing drug culture, especially in the eighties. Most of the drug action was in upper Manhattan, particularly Harlem and Washington Heights. Dealers there bought large quantities of cocaine and distributed it in the Bronx, Brooklyn, and later Queens. By the time they reached my neighborhood, the drug dealers and crime syndicates had become highly organized—they'd made all their mistakes in Brooklyn and the Bronx. Wealthy drug dealers bought nice homes in Queens and set up shops to take advantage of all that middle-class money.

Along with the Supreme Team, Lorenzo Nichols (aka "Fat Cat") controlled South Jamaica, a working-class neighborhood only four miles from my home. Most of the residents lived in either older two-family homes or the projects. Jamaica Avenue, part of the neighborhood's northern border, was filled with people every night, crowds

who strolled the cracked sidewalks past razor wire on fenced parking lots, past hand-lettered signs in storefronts, and past homes with bars over the windows.

Drugs drew people to South Jamaica, and the dealers controlled the street. I'd heard that one corner drug spot made \$150,000 a day. These guys robbed, murdered, and dealt drugs, but they caught the nation's attention in February 1988 when Howard "Pappy" Mason, a drug dealer associated with Fat Cat, ordered his men to kill a cop. Twenty-two-year-old police officer Eddie Byrne was shot to death in his patrol car, provoking national outrage and an intense police crackdown on drug dealing in Queens. George H. W. Bush carried Eddie Byrne's police badge with him on the presidential campaign trail, even as Nancy Reagan continued to tell kids to "just say no."

You might think all that crime and murder would frighten a kid so much that he'd want to avoid the drug dealer's lifestyle. Unfortunately, I'd been attracted to it long before crime in Queens hit the national radar. I'd been hooked as a youngster, baited by flashy toys and expensive rides.

When mopeds first came out, one kid had a blue-and-white moped everyone talked about. Rumor had it that it had cost thousands of dollars and that he got it because his family was connected to the mob (a rumor that seemed to be confirmed later when I was told his uncle had been discovered chopped up in the trunk of a car). That kid was the only sixteen-year-old in Queens with a moped, and everyone knew he could afford it because his family ran drug spots.

Despite the serious pockets of poverty in the area, a seventeen-year-old from the neighborhood bought a Cadillac Seville. One afternoon when I was nine or ten, a friend and I walked the block and a half to McDonald's. We were sitting outside when we saw the kid with the Cadillac approaching the drive-through line, but an ambulance pulled in first. My friend and I were wondering if someone was sick when we heard, "Freeze! Don't move, don't move!"

Fifteen armed undercover cops leapt out of the ambulance and surrounded the guy in the Cadillac. Then they pulled him out, laid him on the ground, and cuffed him.

“Drug dealer,” my friend said.

My young brain connected the dots. *Oh! So that’s how he got the Cadillac.*

My parents were always telling me, “If you work hard, you can do things and buy things when you get older.” But I saw kids not much older than I buying nice things whenever they wanted them. To have that kind of power . . . the idea boggled my young brain. To be able to go where I wanted, buy what I wanted, walk down the street and hear others whispering about how cool and powerful I was . . . that was the life of a street god.

Also, unlike my older siblings, I had difficulty escaping the influence of drugs because they seemed to be everywhere. I remember going into a new little store one afternoon and buying a bottle of Nestlé Quik chocolate milk. When I carried my drink outside, I took a sip and gagged. I tipped the bottle and watched the contents spill onto the sidewalk like oatmeal, all clumped together. When I went home and told my mother, anger flared in her eyes. “That’s not a store,” she said, giving me a hard look. “You don’t go in there again. Never buy anything from that place.”

I don’t know why I went in the first time—the Jamaican woman who ran it used to yell at all the kids who went inside. But we noticed that all the tough guys hung out there, and later we heard that someone had killed the store’s owner and the owner’s brother. The killer was connected to a man called Mr. McNally.

That’s when I realized that the drug trade had a hierarchy. I’d hear people say, “Oh, you gotta see Mr. McNally” or “You need to meet Mr. McNally.”

By the time I entered middle school, I understood that the drug

world was complicated and ruthless. Yet I no longer wanted to be just a cool dealer—I wanted to be the man at the top of the ladder.

I got my start in drug dealing shortly after I met Blaze, a kid from Harlem, in middle school. He pulled me aside one afternoon and gestured toward his pocket. “Yo, I have these mess-tabs,” he said, lowering his voice. “They’re little pills. You take one, man, you’ll be on a joyride.”

I gaped at him. “Really?”

He grinned. “I’ll give you one, and then I’d love for you to help me sell ’em. They sell for three dollars each, and you can keep a dollar for each one you sell.”

I liked the idea of making money, and I liked the idea of the pills. So I swallowed one and went back to class. The teacher stood up in front of us and said we were about to have a special assembly led by a group that had come in to talk to us about drugs.

Meanwhile, nothing seemed to be happening to me. I couldn’t believe it. Here I’d just taken my first pill, but I couldn’t feel anything. I didn’t think the pill was going to do anything.

I sat near Tamera, a girl I liked, and somehow I found the nerve to tell her so.

She looked at me like I’d grown an extra head. “You like me? Are you serious?”

When she said that, I don’t know why, but I started to laugh and cry literal tears. The bell rang and we stood and went out to go hear about drug abuse, and for some reason I couldn’t stop giggling. I managed to control it at first, but the more the drug counselor talked, the harder it was for me to control myself. I finally burst out laughing, and the counselor shot me a look that said, *I think you’re high right now, but how could you be? You’re only a kid.*

In that second, I realized I was high. That drug had messed with my mind and lowered my self-control. I didn’t like being out of control.

Later I told Blaze I didn’t want to use the drugs, but I’d help him

sell them. I started to walk around with the other drug dealers, and they'd buy mescaline tablets from me. But Blaze ran out and was never able to get any more, so for a while my drug dealing ended. Then a girl gave Blaze and me a half pound of weed, which we sold on weekends at my hot dog stand. Eventually that supply ran out too.

Yet I'd had a taste of money and success, and I wanted more. I knew it was only a matter of time before I would pick up selling again.

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When I was five, my older sister Dawn went away to Sarah Lawrence College—big news for our family, since the school was one of the top one hundred colleges in the country.

I was glad to see her when she came home for Christmas break, but I wasn't sure what she meant when she told us she'd been saved. "I have Jesus," she told me, her eyes glowing. "I'm different now."

"That's great," I told her, but I still wasn't sure what she meant. She didn't look different, but she sure acted different. For one thing, she began to play Andraé Crouch music, and I just couldn't get into it.

So I walked into her room with my hands over my ears. "Why are you playing that lame music?"

She smiled at me. "I'm worshipping Jesus."

"What? Man, put on some Earth, Wind & Fire. Put on anything else."

Dawn didn't change her music; she just kept playing Andraé Crouch, who kept singing "To God Be the Glory."

Then Dawn really went off the deep end. She began playing tapes—not of people singing, but of people *talking*. They were men, mostly, and they talked and talked, their voices coming through the walls and driving me crazy. I asked her who was doing all that talking on tape, and she said Oral Roberts.

"Who's he?"

"He's a preacher."

“Man.” I shook my head. You had to be some kind of crazy if having Jesus meant that you sat around listening to people talk all the time. I thought Dawn had fallen off the planet. She wouldn’t hang out with us as she used to but instead sat in her room, worshiping and listening to those talking tapes.

One day some of our younger cousins came over. One of them, Terry, went up to hug Dawn. “Hey, Dawn! I hear you’re saved!”

“Yes!” she said, her eyes shining again.

“That’s so cool! I am too!”

They were practically jumping for joy, but all I could think was, *More people got Jesus? What’s happening around here?*

My family weren’t what you’d call regular churchgoers. We went to church once in a blue moon—on Easter and Christmas, mostly, when we knew we had to get dressed up, go to church, and tolerate a man who yelled at us for an hour or so. It wasn’t fun.

But Dawn and Terry were doing something different. They were playing tapes and singing, and in every conversation they seemed to sneak in a reference to what God had to say about every subject under the sun.

I just couldn’t connect the two experiences. My church experience was nothing at all like what Terry and Dawn were doing and saying.

After Terry and the other cousins left, Dawn called me into her room and gave me a little box. “Open it,” she said. “It’s for you.”

I opened it and found an illustrated Bible.

“It’s about God,” she said, watching me flip through the pages to see the pictures.

I shook my head and repeated what I’d heard my father say at least a dozen times. “I don’t believe in God.”

Dawn sighed heavily, and I could tell she was frustrated. “You know what, Dimas?” She tilted her head to meet my eye. “If you want to see God, you go into the other room and you ask him to show himself to you. He will, if you ask him.”

“All right.”

With the simple determination of a child, I went into my mother’s bedroom and got on my knees. I squeezed my eyes shut and said, “God, if you’re real like my sister says, show me. I want to know you’re real.”

When I opened my eyes, I was somewhere else, as if I were in a vision. I saw a grassy field, where two men stood measuring something with a long ruler. They stopped what they were doing long enough to look over at me, and I could tell they were smiling. They had beards, but I was so struck by those peaceful smiles that I couldn’t tell if the men were black or white.

I freaked out and closed my eyes, desperate to block out the sight.

When I opened my eyes again, I was back in my mother’s room. I got up and ran, terrified, back to Dawn. “I believe!” I yelled, my feet pounding the floor. “I really believe! I saw these men measuring grass and fields, and everything was bright and shiny, and I got scared and ran. And now I’m back here.”

Dawn smiled. “Good. Now we’ve got to start reading the Bible together.”

After that, I would sit with her every day, and she would read Bible stories to me. I was too young to read the big words on the page, but I could always tell where she was reading. Sometimes she’d get interrupted and look away. When she was ready to read again, she’d say, “Now, where was I?” and I could always tell her exactly where she’d stopped.

Dawn had to go back to school after that holiday break, and after that nobody read the Bible to me. My interest in spiritual things faded, but my sister had planted seeds. Oh yes, she had.