

Prologue

"NOTHING BEFORE FAMILY..."

Washington, D.C., more than a decade ago...

Life is all about choices. The expression of one's God-given free will. An individual's prerogative to do what they want and live how they see fit. In life, a person makes choices that will serve as a kind of blueprint for how their existence will play out. Game changers. The kind of choices that will affect their life and the lives of everyone around them.

Sad thing is, sometimes, a person fails to think about the choices they've made until those very same choices come back to bite them in the ass. It's funny how that works. Hell, it's just plain funny how life in general works...

Speaking of choices, Maurice Broadnax had made plenty of choices over the years and just about all of them were bad. Most of his choices consisted of doing dirt and stepping on the neck of anyone who stood in his way. Like a broken GPS, his choices had led him all the way down the wrong path. Lost and fallen, he no longer had any choices left to make. Kind of like jumping off a cliff without a parachute or bungee cord.

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Now, Maurice found himself at the end of his road and searching in the darkness for a way out. Hoping for a second chance to erase his long list of regrets instead of adding to it. But there was no way out and no chance of a do-over because it was much too late in the game for Maurice.

And someone had just made his final choice for him. Moe, as he was known in the streets, felt like he was dying as he lay the filthy basement floor of an abandoned apartment building.

With nothing left but his desperation, he clung to life like a fly clung to shit. Moe was trapped in a fight he had no chance of winning. Each strained gasp for air, each weakening heartbeat only delayed the inevitable as he felt the life evacuating his body. The Grim Reaper was closing in fast now, having seized the upper hand in this tussle thanks to the savage beating Moe had endured at the hands and feet of his assailants.

Moe attempted to speak but the blood pooling in his throat forced him to gag and cough. His breaths were nothing more than gurgled wheezing now. His hands shook as his muscles spasmed. Extreme pain seized his body and made him want to vomit. The crimson stains on the front of his shirt and pants forecasted tonight's outcome. Death had punched a one-way ticket on the expressway to hell for this man's soul.

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The teenager standing a few feet away stared in open-mouthed silence, afraid to speak a word or even draw a breath. Horror and amazement washed over him and he wondered what message the beaten man had been trying to communicate as he'd struggled to speak.

His father called his name, but the boy didn't hear him. The shock of what he was witnessing transfixed him and blocked out all other sound. So much so that his father had to jar him out of his trance.

"Cuttino!" Ezra Harrell said again, raising his voice this time. "You hear me calling you?"

The teenager looked at his father and nodded but remained silent as he tried to swallow the lump in his throat. He hadn't known what he would see tonight, but he never would've imagined something like this. Never.

Even when he saw his father looking at him and motioning with his hand for him to come closer, he couldn't move. His feet were cinder blocks. The defeated look on the man's face and the fading light in his eyes, held Cuttino in a trance.

Half an hour ago, when their car had arrived at the broken-down building, the teenager had struggled to contain his excitement.

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The shiny, chrome-plated Ruger .45 his father had given him felt heavy and real in his hands. His sweat-slicked palms had fought to maintain their grip, forcing him to switch the pistol between his hands and back again.

His father must have noticed his son's restlessness because he nudged him and said, "Relax son, you won't need that tonight. Put it away."

He smiled and winked at him, giving the boy's head a quick rub. "It isn't loaded anyway. I just wanted you to get a feel for it. You're here to watch and learn this time around, that's it."

Cuttino tried to hide his disappointment and looked up at his father who stood just a couple of inches taller than him. By his next birthday, he'd probably be tall enough to see clear over his daddy's head. Not that it would matter, because he'd always have to follow his father's law no matter how tall he grew. That would never change.

The .45 seemed to twitch in his hand, and Cuttino wanted to squeeze its trigger and blow something away. He wanted to empty the entire nine-round clip into anything, it didn't matter what, just to sample the pistol's raw power. Before tonight, he'd never held anything more hard-hitting than a tiny .22. But this

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Ruger, shiny and magnificent, was a whole new animal to him.

Obedience overpowered curiosity, and Cuttino did as his father commanded. He slipped the pistol back into the waistband of his jeans and looked at the empty building in front of him. What a waste of time. If he wasn't going to get in any target practice, then why were they out here in the middle of the night?

Father and son stepped deeper into the darkness, moving towards the narrow opening of the building's basement. Meager lighting pulsed out of a fading yellow bulb dangling from the low water-stained ceiling.

The air in the room was stale and suffocating and it reeked of piss and sewage. The stench assaulted Cuttino's nose with all the force of an open-handed slap. He wanted to turn away and cover his nose, but if his father wouldn't, then he wouldn't either. He also didn't want to miss a second of what might happen in the next few minutes, whatever that might be.

On the other side of the light-starved basement, he saw his two uncles. His father's older brothers stood on either side of a beaten down man who was slumped on all fours. Through the thick, purple bruises and caked-on blood on the man's swollen face, Cuttino recognized

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him as one of his father's workers. *What could he have done to deserve this kind of ass-whippin'?*

This man was a member of their family, wasn't he? He couldn't remember the man's name right away, but he'd seen him many times around the family's house.

With a nod from his father, his uncles snatched the man up by his collar, forcing him up on his knees. His father motioned for him to stay behind as he stepped out of the shadows and into the flickering light. He watched his father lower into a crouch and edge closer to the man's face.

In a voice that sounded more like a growl, he heard his father say, "Hey Moe, can you hear me? Wake up, brotha. We got a few things we need to discuss here. You hear me? I said wake your ass up."

Cuttino saw the man stir as his father continued talking.

"You stole from me, Moe, didn't you? You greedy bastard, you. You stole from my family? What? You didn't think we would find out? Come on man, you can't be that damn dumb. Can't be. But then again, here we are, huh? Right here, right now."

The man's entire body shook with fear. He tried to shake his head in protest, but Cuttino's father stood and launched his right knee into the man's throat. The blow toppled the man backwards into a pile of trash

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and scrap metal. Clouds of dust plumed and the man's ragged coughs and wheezes echoed throughout the basement as he tried to catch his breath.

"That wasn't a question. I know exactly what you did. Ain't no mistaking it."

His father took a step back and brushed the dust from his black suit with both hands.

"Pick his ass up."

His uncles did as his father ordered, both of them holding the man up by his armpits. Moe slumped forward and looked close to passing out, his glassy eyes rolling as his head lolled from side to side.

"I trusted you and you go and shit on that trust. All over a few thousand dollars, right? Chump change," his father said as he lit a cigarette and took the first drag.

"Tell me something, Moe. Is that all your life is worth to you? A couple-few thousand dollars? That's a damn shame, man."

"Tino," Cuttino heard his father call to him, "give me that piece you're holding. Come on with it. Hurry up."

He edged forward and pulled the pistol from the small of his back. He massaged its black rubber grip one last time and handed it to his father. The pistol's chrome gleamed in the dim light as if the Ruger held a hungry anticipation of what was about to happen. *Time for some action*, it seemed to say.

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His father took the weapon and jerked his head towards the building's entrance, signaling him to move away. He then took a magazine clip from the inside pocket of his suit jacket and loaded it into the .45.

"You're a piece of shit, Moe," his father said, flicking his lit cigarette towards the shadows. "And you know what we do with pieces of shit around here, right?"

Moe didn't bother to try and answer the question.

"Yeah, that's right. You know how we do. We flush shit."

Cocking a round into the pistol's chamber, his father raised the .45 and fired five shots point blank into Moe's chest. The Ruger bucked in his father's hand as it growled and spit fire in the direction of the condemned man.

The sudden and deafening boom ricocheted off the room's hollow walls, causing Cuttino to flinch. He'd watched wide-eyed as the man's chest exploded in a nasty collage of blood and torn flesh. The lethal impact of the gunshots had pushed the man's body into an awkward position, pinning his legs beneath him.

Now, Cuttino continued his watch, still mesmerized as Moe took the final breaths of his existence. He stepped close enough to see the man's eyes. Eyes that grew dark and took on a final kind of darkness that squashed all thoughts of seeing another sunrise.

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He'd never seen a man die for real. Those movies he loved to watch didn't have anything on what he was witnessing tonight.

His father lowered the smoking pistol and spit on the dead body. "Done deal. Get rid of this garbage. Put him where no one will ever find his ass."

Then his father turned and walked in his direction. He used a handkerchief he'd pulled from his breast pocket to wipe away any blood that may have gotten on his suit.

"Let's go, Tino. Time to get on home," his father said, placing a strong hand on the boy's shoulder, guiding him out of the musty basement. They headed towards their waiting car and its driver.

"I want you to remember what you saw here tonight, son," his father said once the car pulled away from the building. "I don't like to use violence, but nothing ever comes before our family. Hear me? Nothing."

Cuttino didn't respond, just continued to stare straight ahead. He didn't know how he felt or how he was supposed to feel about what he'd just seen.

"Hey, boy, look at me," his father said. "You needed to see this tonight. You may not have liked it, may not have understood it, but I needed you to see this. This is one lesson you have to learn and never forget. If anyone, I mean anyone, ever tries to hurt us, we take

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care of it. No matter what, the family always comes first. Nothing before family.”

Cuttino Marcellus Harrell couldn't have known he would see a man die that evening. Nothing in his short time on this earth had prepared him for tonight. He'd seen his father execute a man without hesitation or remorse. He hadn't wanted to look, but he'd been unable to turn away.

As their car transported them away from the darkened basement and away from Dead Moe, three words burned into Cuttino's brain:

Nothing before family...