

CHAPTER I

The City's streets were sizzling. The drop in temperature that usually accompanied the dimming sky in September was overpowered by the stubborn persistence of a lingering summer heat wave. It had been hot and sticky earlier when Reginald Carter stepped outside of the Hilton to stretch his legs and get a breath of outside air. The all day session with the Colbert Company executives and attorneys had also been muggy and left him feeling like he had just crossed the finish line of a 10K run in the middle of July. Looking forward to the forty-minute ride home, Reggie headed south on Avenue of the Americas. The sun's rays had burrowed deeply into the concrete and asphalt all day and now the pavement radiated a torrid echo, engulfing him in a sac of heat and humidity when he stepped onto the sidewalk. Drivers, too impatient and in too much of a hurry, sped uptown honking their horns and screeching their tires while weaving in and out, competing for the post position at the next light. The emissions from the swarm of autos left a shroud of exhaust fumes that transformed the air into a translucent grit. The pace of the city seemed hurried. Eleven thirty on a Saturday night is late in most places- it's early in New York City.

Reggie continued the walk toward the 48th Street Garage where his car was parked. Reflecting on the day, he felt satisfied that the deal was, for all intents and purposes, closed. The terms and conditions of the final agreement had been difficult to reach, and now all was done except the formalities of signing. Today's meeting was the culmination of weeks, no, a lifetime of hard work and determination. It looked as though his ambitions, his aspirations, his quest for true wealth and control would soon be real. A modest smile formed on his face and he turned the corner to head west on 48th street.

The dimly lit cross street was deserted, a weird contrast to the bustle of the Avenue, so he picked up his pace. Although this was a relatively safe part of town, any area in the City can be threatening-sometimes. Reggie knew that while walking in New York it's best to look like you're headed somewhere, so he walked with the brazen stride of a Gothic City veteran while casually looking around, taking inventory of his surroundings. He was dressed in slightly faded blue jeans and a medium gray sweatshirt, a statement of protest to working on Saturday to complete a task that should have ended three days earlier. The tactics of the Colbert attorneys had extended the negotiations far beyond what was required. He did sport a crisp white shirt underneath, however, just to remind the Esquires that he knew how to dress for success. The bill of his Yankees ball cap, which he had worked hard to fashion into the perfect arc, was pulled down slightly over his brow. He still couldn't bring himself to wear his cover, nib to the back, even though he had seen many grown men do so; it looked too childish and pushed too hard against the grain of his military bearing. His white tennis shoes put a youthful bounce in his step- he noticed when he caught his reflection in a shop window. Girls in their late teens and early twenties often came on to him when he was dressed this way, not knowing that he was old enough to be their father. He did, after all, work hard to keep in shape. He anticipated living a long and healthy life, enjoying the fruits of his labors, which he was about to start harvesting very soon.

A clamor to his rear startled Reggie and he glanced back. Across the street, he saw two young men race around the corner and duck into a dark doorway. A few seconds later a NY City police car followed with lights flashing in pursuit. They drove past the obscured hideout where the two had stooped and Reggie wondered how the cops ever got their man. Trying to stay unaffected by the commotion, he turned

and continued toward his garage, noticing in his periphery that the police car had slowed, presumably to search the doorways for the two suspects. His heartbeat quickened when it occurred to him that he wasn't dressed in business attire, it was late on Saturday night, he was off the beaten path, and NY City police officers often mistook the identity of black men, sometimes with disastrous consequences. He might well be targeted as one of the suspects.

The whoop of the police car's siren preceded a voice over a loudspeaker, confirming his fears.

“You! Stop right there!”

Growing up in the South in the fifties and sixties had conditioned him to view the police as unfriendly. During most of his formative years policemen had been white authority figures that placed no value on the life of the people in his community. It wasn't until he was a teen that the first Black policemen were hired in his hometown. He had distinct memories of mean spirited, uniformed white men working hard to maintain the status quo of white supremacy- by any means necessary. He thought he had outgrown his early conditioning, but now here he was, a lone Brother, being stopped by the police- a suspect. He knew he had done nothing wrong, but his fight or flight response began to kick in and he assessed the situation while trying to maintain his composure. The already thick New York air became even more soggy, his pulse sped up and he could feel his heart thumping rapidly inside his chest, causing the veins in his temple to throb to its beat. His entire body seemed to moisten at once and he felt beads of sweat roll down the inside of his thighs and the center of his lower back.

Reggie stopped and turned toward the police car. He looked back at the dark doorway where the young men had hidden and wondered if

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he should give up the two young brothers for his own freedom. What could they have done? Did they do anything at all but defy authority? If he didn't give them up, would that make him complicit in their crimes? Clearly they must see that he was not one of the kids they were chasing, don't they?

Not wanting the situation to escalate any further, he reached into the neck of his sweatshirt to retrieve his driver's license from his shirt's pocket. When dressed down and in the City, Reggie typically kept his driver's license, his insurance card, and one credit card in a hard to pick pocket, along with some cash in the front pocket of his trousers. This would minimize any losses he might suffer if he was held up. While he struggled to retrieve the I.D. the policemen swung open their car doors and reached toward their belts.

All motion seemed to slow while Reggie's mind raced to keep pace with what was happening. By not realizing the heightened emotional state of the policemen, had he actually provoked a deadly response? He had to diffuse the situation quickly, or it might continue to escalate, so he stepped toward them, hoping that they would see that he was not a kid and that they had the wrong man. He was pointing to the doorway behind them to expose the real culprits when one of the kids bolted from the hideout and turned the corner. Even more confused now, the cops refocused their attention on Reggie who was about to pull his I.D. out of the neck of his sweatshirt. The policemen had now drawn their weapons and were bearing down on Reggie, who could not believe this was happening. *"Surely they must understand that this is a mistake"*, he thought. *"Surely they must see that I'm no petty criminal. It'll only take a second to clear this up, I'll show them this is just a mistake."*

Reggie continued to step toward the police car and he heard one of them shout, “I said stop”.

The events that unfolded from that point were surreal. The younger of the policemen yelled “Gun!” and began to discharge his weapon. Reggie heard a rapid succession of loud pops and felt himself being brutally thrown backward by the force of projectiles entering his chest.

“No, this isn’t happening” he thought, his body slamming hard onto the sidewalk. A sharp pain shot through his head and down the bridge of his nose like a bolt of lightning. The concussion rattled his brain and sent shock waves throughout his nervous system, upsetting the rhythm of his breath. Silently mouthing, “this is a mistake, this is a mistake” while helplessly lying on the sidewalk, he watched, through the narrow opening between the buildings above, a cluster of clouds pass before a full moon. He tried desperately to say, “this is a mistake”, but no words sounded, there was only a gurgling noise. His chest cavity began to fill with blood and there was a wheezing sound, his desperate gasps for air.

All of his sensations seemed amplified and distorted while he lay there, trying not to believe that this was happening to him. How could his life have taken such a sharp turn from being on top just minutes ago to being on his back, down from gunshots, delivered in the adrenaline induced frenzy of a police chase, and it was all a mistake, all a mistake. He could hear the echoing sound of the policemen’s voices, they were trying to figure out what had happened and what to do now.

“Did he have a fucking gun?”

“I thought I saw a flash when he reached in his shirt”

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“What the fuck do you mean you thought you saw a flash, did you see a goddamn gun?”

“I don’t know; it happened so fast. The son of a bitch didn’t stop when I told him to, and when the other asshole started running,...I... I thought it was a set up,..... I don’t know.”

“But you said ‘gun’ when you started shooting, you must have seen something”

The younger policeman stood over Reggie, looking around, looking dumbfounded, searching for something that he could validate as a weapon, and the other one spoke up.

“You saw his watch, you saw his goddamn watch.” The older policeman was bent over, frisking Reggie while he lay prone on his back. Get on the horn and call a wagon while we figure this out. The son of a bitch is still alive. You better hope he’s a nobody... or he don’t pull through this, or our asses are grass.”

Reggie lay on the sidewalk, body in shock, gazing up at the full moon which was now wholly in view. He thought of how beautiful the sky was, aglow in lunar luminance. He could discern the dark blue color of the night’s sky and thought, “*oh, that’s why they call it midnight blue*”. He could feel a faint, seemingly distant pain in his chest and his body tingled all over. His left leg twitched; out of control, like the ticking of a frog’s leg on the dissecting board. The darkness of the streets was beginning to close in around him, the only apparent light was emanating from the full moon above, which seemed to get brighter and brighter. Reggie’s thoughts were short and disconnected. “*What time is it now? Will the garage charge me extra if I don’t get my car soon? Is that a cat that I hear? Why am I lying here*”

*on the sidewalk? Who's holding me down? Get off of me, I can't move!
Is that a cat that I hear?"*

While Reggie lay still on his back, a silent figure emerged from the shadows. A woman approached, wearing a long, off white dress that stopped just above her high top sneakers. She was carrying a doubled up plastic grocery bag in one hand and what appeared to be a canvas duffel bag in the other. Her head was crowned with a tattered straw hat with a bright red ribbon around it. Her pace was slow and measured and she approached with caution. The two policemen were standing by with their backs turned. Reggie could hear faint bits of their conversation, they were going over what had just happened to make sure they had their story together.

The old lady knelt over Reggie and checked to see if he was still alive. Seeing that he was conscious she whispered, "don't worry honey, I saw the whole thing, don't worry now, you didn't do anything wrong". Her voice was clear and her tone and enunciation was that of someone well educated. Quickly reaching into her duffel bag and withdrawing a bottle of spring water, she raised Reggie's head and placed the plastic bag, which was filled with clothing or rags, underneath it. She broke the seal on the water, twisted off the cap, and poured a small amount through his lips. She reached into her duffel bag, pulled out a clean cloth, wet it with the water, and then placed it on Reggie's forehead. Looking up and down his body for wounds, her manner showed experience in caring for the injured. One of the policemen noticed her and yelled, "Hey, what are you doing over there, get back and leave him alone." The old attendant ignored the order and took the cloth from Reggie's forehead and began to wipe his face. It reminded him of being a child, his mom wiping the dirt from his face after being outside all day playing. He could hear the old lady

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saying to him, “Don’t worry honey, you’ll be just fine, Jesus loves you, Jesus loves you.”

Reggie refocused his gaze at the bright moon, he could once again see the clouds drift by, partially eclipsing it. The other sights and sounds around him began to fade and he heard the old lady continue to say, “Jesus loves you, Jesus loves you.”

Reggie began to echo the refrain in his head, Jesus loves me, Jesus loves me, Jesus loves me, yes Jesus loves me...Sights and sounds around him grew fainter and weaker. He could no longer discern the blue in the swatch of sky above, only a fast fading ball of light. The voices of the policemen were now just garbled vowel sounds, lost in the shuffle and noise of the spectators that were beginning to assemble. He seemed to hear a chorus of children singing in the background...*yes Jesus loves me, for the bible tells me so.*