

An aging actor is confronted with his past when a masked stranger holds him hostage. During the novel - a mystery and a romance - two men begin to understand how one must live with the truth, rather than embrace impossible dreams.

CONSCIENCE CHOICE

By ChelleyB

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Conscience Choice

2nd edition

ChelleyB

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CHAPTER 1

I pull the covers tightly over my ears, but I can still hear the screaming. I bury my face in the pillow, but the sounds grow louder. Finally, there's silence. I close my eyes and brace myself for the evil on the other side of the wall. I jump as the bedroom door flies open like a loud clap of thunder. The smell of alcohol covers my room, even before he staggers to my bed.

My next memory is flying through the air and landing hard on top of the nightstand. There's a warm wetness trickling down the side of my face. My ears are ringing, and my head is spinning. I keep reaching for something - anything to help me get to my feet, but like a dream, nothing feels real or solid.

I scramble around on the floor trying to avoid the kicks and punches. Silent, crying only makes it last longer. He grabs my arm, dragging me, violently, out of the room. I tried to cover my head. It didn't work. My ears popped when my head banged against the door. We head toward my sister's room, and I hear the usual "*you lil' bastard and that lil' bitch*". This is a routine in our house. It happens at least once a week, sometimes more. How many times all depends on what kind of drunk my stepfather John, is going to be that day. But listen, I don't care how often you get your ass kicked you never get used to it. For me, the worst part is hearing my mother scream.

We make it to my sister's room and John's voice is bouncing off the walls. He throws me on the floor, stomping my body several times before walking away. I raise my head and through blurred vision, I try to find my sister. My eyes scan the room and I see what looks like a life-sized rag doll. My heart is beating so loud that John's rambling sounds like an echo from far away. Everything around me froze and

I swear, for a minute, time stopped. I drop my head into my hands and for the first time in my life I talk to God.

Then, I heard a muffled cry. I see John smashing my sister Shauna's head into the mattress. He grabs her by the hair and starts to toss her around on the bed. The muffled cries turned into hysterical screams. I attempt to run to her, but I can't move. Her cries hurt my heart. I make another desperate attempt. This time I manage to get to my knees. From there everything is moving at a lightning speed and within seconds we are both crashing into the wall.

John says, "you have until I load my pistol to get the fuck out my house."

My legs are tingling but I grab Shauna's hand and we run as fast as we can. The house is pitch-black, but we make it down the stairs and out the door. We're running full speed, not looking back until we are several houses away. I'm having a hard time breathing, so I lean forward with my hands on my knees. Anything to get air into my lungs. The cold from the ground is already soaking through to my bare feet.

"Are you okay?" Shauna asks. I'm shivering so bad she probably thinks I'm having a seizure.

"I'm fine. Just cold." I look at my sister's face. The tears are freezing on her skin. I reach for her hand. "Come on let's head for the storage."

We walk for what feels like miles before reaching the alleyway that leads to an old storage shed. There was once a house standing in front, but it was torn down years ago. Over the last few months, we borrowed blankets, candles and cigarette lighters from our house and hid them inside the storage. When you're thrown out as often as we are, you learn to prepare. Once inside we drape the blankets over our shoulders and lit the candles for light. The floor of the shed is made of mostly dirt and the wind is whistling through the small cracks in the walls. But honestly, it feels like an oven in here compared to the

Conscience Choice

winter cold outside. Shauna's eyes are red, and there's a fresh stream of tears running down her cheeks.

"Shane?"

"Yeah."

"How much longer can we keep going through this?"

"I don't know," I mumble. "We'll talk about it tomorrow, for now, let's try to keep warm."

I put my arms around her, rocking back and forth. Shauna is sixteen, two years older than me. She is short and petite, and I'm tall and lanky. Still, everyone says they can tell we're brother and sister, because we look so much alike. We both inherited a long Indian-like nose, a cocoa complexion, and thick wavy hair. I'm Shauna's kid brother, but I've always felt it was my job to look after her, especially with the way John looks at her when he thinks no one's paying attention. But me, I always pay attention. My sister finally falls asleep. The tension in my body relaxes... a little bit. I sit, watching the candles flicker, trying to push the events of tonight out of my head. Doing my best to get through right now, while preparing my mind for tomorrow. Once again, I'm in survival mode. It's just a way of life for us, it's the only life we know.

My mother married John when I was a baby. Our real father died before I was born. We thought John was our father, until we got older and could understand the things he'd say when he was drunk, or mad. My mom had four more kids after they were married, but whenever they argued, which is often, he always ends the argument with Shauna and me. We get beat up or kicked out the house, sometimes both. If we happen to be asleep, he wakes us up. In the winter, I believe I'd prefer the beating. But deep inside I know Shauna's right. We can't keep living like this much longer. It's just that, I've always felt anything is better than foster care or group homes. They are all a joke, a bunch of greedy muthafuckas trying to get paid. Besides, I know they wouldn't keep Shauna and me together. The idea of never seeing

my sister again makes my heart heavy, so I shake my head to get rid of the thought. The candles dwindle into puddles, and I fall asleep.

We wake up the next morning our bodies stiff and sore. My head feels ten times too big, and it takes a few minutes for me to focus. Shauna's back is hurting, and she has a huge bruise on her leg. We look as though we had been in a battle, and in some ways we had. Eventually we make our way outside. The trees and grass are covered in snow, and there's a refreshing smell in the air. A strange stillness. I have a feeling something is gonna be different today.

We head back to the house, not saying a word all the way. Knowing the routine, we go to the back door and knock. My mother opens the door. Her face is swollen, and she's holding her hand over her mouth. My face twist as pity and anger fight for the same space. We start up the stairs.

"Hold on." My mother's tone is casual. "You two need to go pack some clothes. You can't stay." We look at each other then back to Mom. Puzzled. She goes on. "Your father is under a lot of pressure right now. It's simple. We can't afford two extra kids."

My heart drops to my stomach. I stand there stunned. In the past, I had always defended my mom. I tried telling my sister that what was happening wasn't her fault. Maybe I was trying to convince myself, but at this moment, none of it matters. I look at Shauna. She's losing control.

"But Mom, what are we supposed to do?" She cries. "We're kids.

My mother looks at my sister, her hands on her hips. I'm thrown off by her sinister expression. "You gone have to hustle is all I know." She smirks. "There's nothing I can do. John said you gotta go. So, run upstairs, pack whatever clothes you want, and make it quick."

We hurry up the stairs to pack, understanding the urgency to be gone before John gets back.

Shauna is crying nonstop.

Conscience Choice

“Get your clothes,” I tell her. “We’ll be okay. I’ll take care of you.” That seems to calm her down.

We rush to our rooms and race to pack whatever we can. For a moment, I stop, listening while my younger brothers and sisters giggle, playing in the hallway. I can’t remember ever laughing like that. I always tried to be invisible and not bring attention to myself. I was afraid to laugh and always afraid to cry. I stand there lost in a trance.

I hear my sister’s voice. “Shane, where will we go?”

“Don’t worry, I have a plan.”

I go to my closet, drop to my knees, and carefully lift the loose floorboard. I grab the folded sock hidden beneath and quickly put the board back in place. That sock held everything I’d saved this past summer. I did all kinds of things to make money. Running errands, mowing lawns. It was all chump-change though, compared to what I made at a crap game. Shooting dice is a mastered art for me and I never spent a dime. I kept hustling and stashing. I guess I always knew the day would come when my mother would make her choice.

I slip on a pair of jeans, put on two pairs of socks and my boots. I stuff about two hundred dollars in my pocket and the rest I put in my backpack. Shauna is trying to tie her boots, but her hands are shaking too bad. I kneel down, tie her boots, and tell her lets go.

My mother yells, “Shauna, Shane, you better hurry. John will be back soon.”

We walk downstairs and into the kitchen. My mother opens the back door, while nervously looking toward the front. We left that day without my mother making another sound. She didn’t say be careful, take care, or goodbye.

Making it to the nearest bus stop, we sit in the cold, waiting. Both of us carrying a small backpack with all our belongings. Our coats are thin, and we don’t have gloves, but our boots are still in good

condition, so that's keeping our feet warm. I tell Shauna that we're going to the projects so I can speak with Basim. Her eyes got big.

"Basim? The projects? Shane are you crazy? We----"

"We're in a desperate spot," I interrupt. "You see our own mother doesn't care about us! I'm not gonna live in some cardboard box downtown like a bum. We're gonna survive." I place my hand on my chest. "But I can't do it without you, a'ight?"

"Okay," she snuffles. "What do you want me to do?"

"What you're doing right now Shon. Be by my side."

Our bus finally arrives. We step on and I pay our fares. Shauna has never been to the projects before, so during the ride I explain how she should act.

"First of all, look straight ahead. Don't make eye contact with nobody. You don't say a word. I'll do all the talking. And try not to act all nervous, niggas will think you're a nark or something." She nods, giving me a look filled with questions. I know what she's thinking. How do I know so much about all this? I look out the window. I will tell her everything when the time is right. I know she's scared so I give her hand a gentle squeeze. We ride for about twenty more minutes before reaching our stop.

We get off the bus, striding our way for another block. There's a bunch of young jokers hanging on the corner. I can almost hear my sister's heart beating.

"It's okay," I whisper.

Once we got a little closer, I recognize Goldie. I'm guessing he got his name because of all the gold he wore. He has so much gold in his mouth that you can hardly understand a word he says. I take in a deep breath.

Before long I hear a lisped, "Hey Youngblood. What you doin' down here so early?"

Conscience Choice

I turn to him stone faced. "I'm looking for Basim."

He takes a long puff from his blunt, then passed it to the nigga beside him.

"He should be at the café having breakfast by now," Goldie says, trying to hold his breath and talk at the same time.

"A'ight man, thanks." We slap hands. I head to the café.

Shauna follows, locked on my heels.

I can hear Goldie telling his boys, "that's a crazy lil' nigga."

I look straight ahead, but I can see Shauna staring at me out the corner of my eye. We reach the café, which is in the projects. Believe me when I say, the projects, is like a city all on its own, another world inside the world. There is a room in the back of the café where all the heavyweights hang out. You can't even get into the building unless they know you... and they know me. An old guy name Pops comes to the door.

"Hey Youngblood," he said, extending his hand out. "Shouldn't you be at school? And who's this pretty young lady?"

"Pops!" I say, shaking his hand. "This is my sister Shauna."

Shauna nods slowly. "Hi."

"I'm looking for Basim," I continue. "Is he here yet?"

"He's out of town on business. He should be back tomorrow. You kids hungry? Want some breakfast?"

"Sure Pops. Thanks."

Me and Shauna sit down at a booth and eat the best breakfast I've ever tasted, or at least it seems that way. We hadn't eaten since yesterday, so our taste buds were easy to please. We take our time, enjoying the meal. There's no hurry, we have no place to go.

After about three hours we got up to leave. I told Pops I would be back the next day and asked if he would tell Basim I was looking for him. Pops said he would, and waved good-bye. On the way back to the bus stop, I told Shauna we would go downtown to get a room for the night. I wasn't sure if it would work, because of our age, but downtown almost anything is possible.

We got back on the bus and rode for another thirty minutes. We tried several motels, but no one would give us a room. The last motel we tried had a sign in the window that said, 'VACANCIES', but the lady behind the counter told us, she had to check for an available room. She left the front desk and was gone for a long time. The whole thing made me nervous, so we got out of there quick. We went inside almost every store downtown, trying to avoid the cold. We would walk and sit around inside the stores until a manager or other store employees started to give us funny looks, then we'd leave. By nightfall we were almost too tired to breathe. I had blisters on my feet, and I couldn't feel my fingers. Shauna said she couldn't walk another step.

We hadn't eaten since breakfast, so we found the nearest McDonald's and loaded up on the dollar menu. We sat inside for as long as we could... simply enjoying the warmth. Before long, the time came to leave. We bundled up with our thin coats and prepared for the frosty weather outside. A young joker stopped us at the door and asked if we were looking for a place to crash. Before I could answer, he told us about the 24hour XXX theaters. He said a lot of the kids would sleep there at night. All you had to do was buy a ticket. He went on to explain some different ways of making money, but I wasn't listening. He asked how long we had been on the streets? I didn't answer. I grabbed Shauna's arm, told the brother thanks and we walked away. I did appreciate the information, but I'm not looking to make any friends downtown, and I don't need to hear any of his ideas on how to make money. I have my own ideas.

We walk about three blocks to the first theatre we see. I paid the fee, and we went inside. This place is a real freak show. I've never seen anything like it before and I've seen some foul shit. Everywhere

Conscience Choice

you look somebody is offering sex, having sex, asking for sex. Shauna's body is stiff, she has her arm curled around mine, tight. I can feel her body shaking. I move my head from side to side, to settle my nerves. We walk into one of the movie rooms and sit on the back row, under the balcony. I can't see what the people are doing up there, but the sounds make me wanna throw up. I tell Shauna to go to sleep, promising her it will be our last night at this place. She put her head on my shoulder and closed her eyes. My plan is to stay awake as long as I can.

It was a long night. I slept on and off, but never more than ten or fifteen minutes at a time. I was afraid of what could happen while I was asleep, not to me, but to my sister.

At last, morning arrives. There are bodies everywhere. We left and didn't look back. There's an IHOP on the corner, so we stopped for breakfast. While we sat there eating, I could feel Shauna staring at me.

"What?" I ask, without looking up.

She hesitates for a moment. "Shane, what's going on? How do you know those people?"

I stop eating but don't look up. "What people?"

She sighs. "The old man at the café? The guys on the corner? And when did you start hanging out in the projects?"

I look up, clearing my throat. "Do you remember Stan?"

"From school? Yeah," she says, rolling her eyes.

I knew why Shauna sounded disgusted. Stan had been the duke of our school. He did whatever he wanted to do, and he loved taking people's shit. That joker never did any homework, but he always passed to the next grade. Every teacher he had made sure of that. None of them wanted to deal with him another year. Everybody at the school was afraid of him, everybody except me. Shit, after what I deal with every day at home, once I'm outta that house I have no fears.

Besides, I never saw Stan actually fight anybody, all he did was talk loud.

Shauna waves her hand in front of my face. “Okay Shane, stop stalling. Yes, I remember Stan, go on.”

I snap out of my trance and take a deep breath. “A’ight, but it’s a long story.”

Her eyebrows jump straight up. “And where do we have to go?”

“You’re right,” I smirk. So, I began my story, telling her about the time Stan tried to take my shoes.

“He walked up to me with a group of his boys and pointed toward my feet. I looked at him like he was crazy, cause, I knew my shoes were not about shit. I figured he was trying to make a point. But he chose the wrong one to fuck with. First of all, those were my only sneakers. Second, I had all this rage inside me from constantly fighting with John’s ass, I was ready to rumble with all of them.” I shrugged. “Without a word, I dropped my backpack and started kicking his ass. His boys were still, almost like they were frozen. I’m not sure if they were shocked that I was messing him up, or shocked that he could get messed up. Eventually, a few of them stepped up and threw me off him. They snatched Stan and disappeared. No one else saw the fight, so his reputation was still cool, except with his boys.” I pause, waiting to see how Shauna is handling the information so far.

“Go ahead,” I’m listening.

“About a week later, Stan approached me again. I prepared myself for another battle, but instead he asked me if I wanted to make some money. I said, *‘I’m down for that’*. Stan told me his Uncle Samuel worked for Basim. I didn’t know Basim, but I had heard of him. I knew he was a major dealer and ruthless as hell. I figured the other rumors were true. Stan had all that clout because of his connection with some dangerous niggas. But I thought what the fuck he couldn’t be any worse than John. I skipped school and we caught

Conscience Choice

the bus to Medgar Park, down the street from the projects. It was crowded, but his uncle spotted us and waved for us to come over. His uncle was a short, muscled joker with a thick Jamaican accent. Stan explained that he brought a friend, and we were ready to make a run for him. I couldn't help but keep my eyes on Stan, cause, he sounded way too nervous. Samuel walked up to him, standing nose to nose. Then he turned and stared at me. It seemed like the entire park went silent. He raised his hand, and a package was passed up to him. He gave Stan the package, an address, then pulled a gun from under his pant leg. He held it up and asked, *'Ever use one before?'*. We both shook our heads. He handed it to Stan and started to explain what to do. Stan was so nervous he dropped the gun. Samuel was hot. He punched Stan in the face and told him to give back his shit and take his little punk ass to school. Stan was crying when he bent down to pick up the gun. I looked at his uncle and said, *'What about me? I didn't get my chance'*. He laughed and said, *'Oh you think you can do better, eh?'* I didn't laugh or smile. I told him, *'Shoot the gun and show me how it's done'*. He snatched the gun from Stan and grabbed my arm. We walked about fifteen feet away. He held the gun in front of my face, showing me how to hold it, then he aimed and fired. The next thing I heard was Stan scream. He had been shot in the leg. Samuel looked at me and asked if I had the nerve to do that, shoot a nigga for no reason. With no emotion I said, *'I can do it right now if you want me to'*. He stepped back and smiled. I could hear the crowd saying, *'Damn young blood is cold'*. From that point on I was known as Youngblood. Samuel gave me all the information I needed to make the run. After I made it back, I gave him the money and he paid me for making the drop." I take in a deep breath.

Shauna listens intently. She's leaning forward with her elbows on the table. "I know there's more."

I nod. "Samuel told me Basim wanted to meet me. I decided to go. We drove through the projects to the café. Once inside Samuel guided me to a room behind some double doors. I had never seen so much money... jewelry... and every weapon you could imagine. There was a table at the back of the room and that's where we headed.

Samuel grabbed the collar of my shirt and said, ‘*Basim, this is the lil’ young blood I told you about*’. Basim removed the cigar from his mouth and looked me up and down. He told me to sit down, everybody else at the table left. He was nothing like I thought he would be. He was cool as fuck... for a ruthless muthafucka. He was younger than I thought too, cause, I figured somebody with that kind of power had to be an old nigga. We spent the next few hours talking. I told him about John and the bullshit at home. He sat there and listened. I had never met a man that I could talk to like that or one who took the time to hear what I had to say. You know what I mean, not yell, scream, and bitch. It felt nice, felt safe. I stayed until school was out and then I went home. After that, every chance I had I was in the projects with Basim or somewhere near him. I did another run or two and learned a few hustles. He took time to show me everything and I soaked that shit up like a sponge. He would tell me that what separated him from most other hustlers is that he understood this business for what it was, a temporary game. He explained that the idea is to make as much money as you can, while you can, because there will come a time to step away from it.” I look at Shauna, my fingers gripping the edge of the table. “If it wasn’t for you, I’d have left Mom’s house months ago, but I didn’t want to leave you there alone.” I pause. “Shauna, you know I don’t give a fuck about nothing or nobody – but you. Basim is good people. He will help us.”

My sister’s eyes filled with water as we held hands across the table.

“Are you ready to go?” She asks.

I nod and we left.

CHAPTER 2

We catch the next bus heading for the projects. Shauna's not so nervous this time. We reach our stop, get off the bus and walk toward the café. My mind is racing. I'm prepared to get out there and do whatever it takes to provide for Shauna and me. I was thinking, *fuck everybody – I don't need nobody.*

“What are you thinking about?”

I shrug. “Nothing. Why?”

She giggles. “Because you started walking fast and breathing hard.”

“You know me,” I mumble.

“Yeah, I know you. That's why I asked.”

“C'mon it's cold out here,” I say with a smile.

We make it to the café, and I see Pops behind the counter. He waves for us to come over. Shauna plops down comfortably on the nearest stool.

“Hey Pops!” I say, trying to sound cheerful.

“Morning Youngblood. You kids hungry?” Pops asks with a grin.

“Nah, we're okay. Is Basim here, yet?”

“Yeah, he's in the back waiting for you.”

I turn to Shauna. “Wait here for me.”

“Okay,” she whispers.

I walk to the back room and see Basim sitting at his usual table.

“Hey Boz, did you have a good trip?”

“I did. What’s up with you? You looking heavy kid.”

I look toward the ceiling and tap the table with my fingers. I manage to fumble the words, “it’s my stepfather he----”

“Wait a minute,” Basim interrupts. “What did I tell you about looking at a muthafucka when you’re talking to ‘em? Youngblood, you’ve got too much heart to be looking at the ceiling like a little punk. Don’t give NOBODY that kind of power over you. Now sit down, look at me and tell me what’s going on.”

He’s right. I rarely look at anybody eye to eye. When my stepfather would blow up, he would always tell me not to look at him, it was drilled into my head for as long as I can remember. I never knew why. I just knew I wasn’t supposed to do it. I squirm in my seat for a few seconds, then look directly at Basim, eye to eye, and tell him the whole story. The more I talk the more comfortable I feel. I let him know I’m ready to make some real money. I explain how important it is for me to take care of my sister.

He doesn’t respond at first. He sits, staring at me. Then he reached over the table and placed his hand on my shoulder. Before finally saying, “listen, you did the right thing coming to me. I got you. We will work this out. Come on, let me meet your sister. After that I’ll take you to my house, get you cleaned up and put something on that cut. We’ll talk business later.”

I touch my head. My mind is so full of crazy shit that I had forgotten about the cut on the side of my head.

Shauna is sitting on the stool laughing and talking with Pops.

Basim grins. “Well, you don’t have to point your sister out to me.”

I look at Shauna. We both smile.

Conscience Choice

I introduce Shauna to Basim. She shakes his hand and says, *hello*. While Basim and Pops exchange a few words, I notice Shauna is still looking at Basim. I don't know what's going on in this girl's head, but I will get on her about that later. Right now, I wanna take a bath and go to sleep.

It takes over two hours to reach Basim's house. He points to his place from the road. Damn! What's the old saying? *Crime doesn't pay*. Hmph, they hadn't met this nigga. My face is glued to the window.

"How many bedrooms you got?"

"Five. And I have a study that's laid out. I use that room as my get away, to reflect and shit." We both laugh. "There's a game room you need to check out too."

I nod, excited. Looking at Shauna, I can see she's charged up too.

He tells us to make ourselves at home. He has business to handle, but he would be back in a while. He let us know we can each have our own room, just pick one. Any room except the one at the end of the hall that one belongs to him. He shows me where to find the medication for the cut on my head and on his way out the door reminds me that we will talk later. After he leaves, I tell Shauna I will get the room next to Basim and she can have the room on the other side of me. She smiles. I run my bath water and soak for a long time. Hot water feels so good. I clean and medicate my wound. Shauna is downstairs watching television. I yell down, telling her I'm going to sleep for a couple of hours. I'm asleep before my head hits the pillow.

The next thing I know Basim is waking me up. "You okay?"

I rub my eyes. "Yeah, I'm fine. You back already?"

Basim gives a sly smile. "What do you mean already? I've been home several times. Yo ass been knocked out cold."

I jump straight up. “Oh man, what time is it?” I walk over to the window and look outside. It’s dark. “I’m sorry Boz, I didn’t mean to oversleep. I wish you had woken me up!”

“Don’t worry about it, Youngblood,” he laughs. “Come on, I’ve got something to show you.”

I follow him to the main living area in his house. Shauna is sitting on the floor eating popcorn and watching a movie. The sofa is covered with boxes.

Basim nods. “Go on open ‘em up. While you were getting your beauty sleep, we went shopping.”

I open the boxes, and I can’t believe it. There are coats, boots, jeans, shirts, everything. All hot ass street shit, no knock offs. I’m speechless. I look at him in disbelief. Shauna is grinning from ear to ear.

“You should see the stuff I got,” she says, bouncing in place.

I walk over to Basim, look him directly in the eyes. “Thanks man, I’ll pay you back I---”

Basim holds his hand out. “Don’t worry about it. I’ve been where you are. Go get dressed. We’ve got business.”

I shake his hand and grab a few boxes. Shauna stands up to help me. I hurry to get dressed. In the car, he explains what my job will be. He opens the glove compartment and takes out a handgun.

“Before I give you this,” he says. “I’ll teach you how to use it and how to take care of it. Are you with me?”

“I’m there.”

“It’s gonna be your job to watch my runners. I’ll show you the areas you’ll work during your shift. You won’t keep the gun on you but keep it near you. Your job is to make sure nobody fucks with my people. Understand?”

Conscience Choice

I nod, to show I understand. We pull in front of the café.

Basim turns the car off. “You know, Youngblood, a nigga usually has to work his way up to this job. But I trust you and I know you have the heart to do whatever needs to be done. Don’t let me down. Oh yeah, one more question. Let’s say someone tries to rob----?”

“I put them to sleep,” I interrupt.

“That’s my boy,” Basim brags. “That’s my boy.”

We sit in the car for another thirty minutes. He explains that there’s a meeting inside the café, and he has special instructions for me.

“Pay attention. I want you to go to the back door and knock five times. Pops will let you in and tell you what to do next, a’ight?” I nod. He continues. “Now, from the moment you enter that café, I want you to listen closely and watch everyone. This is a very important lesson Youngblood, you got me?”

I take a deep breath. “Let’s do this.”

Basim taps me on the shoulder, and we get out the car. I go to the back door and knock five times. A few seconds later Pops opens the door. He looks around suspiciously before letting me inside.

“Follow me,” he says, in a husky voice, almost a whisper.

I follow him to a room that’s the size of a small closet. There’s a table and chair facing a large window. On the other side of the window, I can see Basim and a room full of people. Pops instructs me to be quiet and listen to the meeting. I sit, amazed at the whole set up. I’m thinking, *they can’t see me, this is deep*. A few seconds later I hear Basim tell everyone it’s time to get started. He stands up, lights his cigar, and leans on the table.

“I know you muthafuckas are aware of what’s happening out there. My people have been hit five times in the last two weeks. My runners are getting shot and robbed right after their watcher leaves

them, which makes me think that whoever's behind the shit is getting information from my camp." He pauses. "What do you think?"

A big joker sitting on the front row throws his hands up. "I don't know man I can't see nobody here pimpin' information."

Basim rubs his fingers across his chin. "So, what you're saying is, you trust everybody in this room?"

The big joker starts to stutter, "No, I, I, I'm---"

A skinny lil' nigga in the corner leans forward. "Hey man," he says. "Next time you out on a run, call me. I'll look after that fine ass wife of yours."

The big joker frowns. "Fuck you, nigga."

"What's the problem?" He laughs. "You trust me, right?"

Everybody's laughing. Everybody except one character sitting in the back. From that point on, I watch him, studying everything about him. He's a brown skinned brotha' with an afro, he has a steel pick poking out from his fro. I figure he's about twenty something. He has on a throw-back jersey and black jeans. He's slouched down low in his seat and one leg keeps rocking from side to side. I notice a glare in his eyes whenever he looks at Basim. At times he seems to be casing the room. If I didn't know better, I'd think he was planning to rob the place. The meeting goes on for almost four hours and during that time everyone in the room either had something to say or responded to something being said, everybody except the brotha' in the back. I'm not sure what he's up to. But one thing is clear, he has no love for Basim. I can see it in his eyes.

A few minutes later Pops comes in and says he's driving me back to Basim's house. We leave out the back door, heading to Pops car. He doesn't say a word. I follow his lead. Pops is normally very playful, so if he is being serious, I know I should as well.

Pops smiles. "See you tomorrow, Youngblood."

Conscience Choice

I rang the doorbell several times. Shauna finally opens the door.

“Were you asleep?”

“Almost,” she yawns.

“Well, go back to bed. I’m gonna wait down here for Basim.”

“Okay, see you in the morning. Goodnight.”

“Goodnight.”

I turn the television on and flop down on the sofa. I can barely keep my eyes open. In an instant I’m asleep. The next thing I hear is a clicking sound next to my ear. I feel a cold piece of steel on the back of my neck. It’s a gun!

“What’s going on?” My voice is shaking.

“Sit up and turn around,” the voice says sternly.

I sit up, turning around slowly. I look up to see Basim. I let out a sigh of relief. He tells me to stand up.

“Youngblood,” he begins. “Never go to sleep with your back to the door.”

I nod slowly.

He motions for me to follow him. “Come on to the kitchen so we can talk.”

I follow, calmly. Basim places his brief case on the table. He opens it up and pulls out five different handguns.

“I’m gonna show you how to clean these. While you clean, we’ll talk about what you heard tonight. Cool?”

“Cool.”

I spend the next few hours learning how to clean each gun. Basim tells me, a gun is like a new baby, it should be kept close and clean.

“What did you think about the meeting tonight?”

“Man, I ain’t never seen no shit like that!”

He grins.

“But to be real. I felt you had an enemy in the room.”

He looks up. “An enemy? Now, who would that be?”

I look directly at Basim. “The guy in the back with the afro, he had on a throw-back jersey, black jeans. He didn’t make a comment during the whole meeting and when everybody else was laughing and clowning around, he didn’t even smile.”

Basim gives a half smirk. “Maybe he’s just a quiet brother.”

“Nah, it’s more than that. Whenever you would speak, he’d glare at you. Then when you looked his way, he’d nod and smile. But the moment you turned around he’d give you that look again. I know that look... it’s the same one I give my stepfather.”

Basim opens his jacket and pulls out two cigars. “Well done, Youngblood. Well done. We gone make a soldier out of you yet. The snake you’re talking about is Ojo. I’ve noticed the prisons he shoots me when he thinks I’m not looking and I’m sure he has something to do with the robberies and shit. But that’s enough for tonight, you did good. In the morning you’ll have your final and most important test, a test of loyalty. You think you down for that?”

“I’m down for whatever.”

Basim smokes his cigars, while I finish cleaning the guns. We keep that up for several hours, never saying a word. Once finished, I told Basim good night and went straight to bed.

The next morning, I wake up to a loud commotion downstairs. I jump out of bed and run out the room. I stop at the top of the stairs and watch as Basim drags a woman across the floor. I have never seen this side of him before. Suddenly, I realize how dangerous this man is. The woman is on the floor begging and pleading, but Basim

continues to kick her over, and over again. I can see blood on his shoes from the blows to her head and body. I open my mouth, but nothing comes out. He must have sensed my presence, because he stops and looks up at me.

“C’mere right now,” he said through clenched teeth.

I move as fast as I can, but my legs feel heavy. I finally make it to the bottom of the stairs. The woman’s face is so bloody I can’t tell if her eyes are open or closed. Basim grabs the woman by her hair, lifting her head up.

“Youngblood, there are two kinds of women. There’s a lady and there’s a bitch! This Youngblood is a bitch. And this is how you treat a bitch.”

He lets go of her hair. Her head slams against the floor. I just know she’s dead. I stare at her limp body hard, trying to find any sign of life, there is none. Basim grabs my shirt with his bloody hands.

“Don’t waste your feelings on this ho’. A woman like this can get you killed! Do you hear me?” I looked him directly in the eyes and nod. He lets go of my shirt and puts his hand on my shoulder. “You’re gonna have to let go of all that emotional shit, because unless you can recognize a bitch for what she is and treat her accordingly, you won’t last ten minutes in this game. Do I make myself clear?”

I take a deep breath. “I understand, Boz. So, what do we do next?”

He smiles. “Get dressed while I make a phone call.”

I turn and walk back up the stairs. The first fourteen years of my life my stepfather took away most of my emotions, and today I let go of the rest. Once upstairs, I knock on my sister’s door. She doesn’t answer, so I walk in. Shauna is rolled into a ball on the bed, crying. Normally I would have walked over to comfort her, but our situation has changed.

“Shauna, everything is okay. It’s only business, but I need you to stay in this room until I come get you. Do you understand?” She

rapidly nods her head up and down. “Are you hungry? Want me to bring you something?”

She shakes her head. There is a place deep inside me that still wants to give her a hug, but instead I turn and walk away. I close the door and wince as I struggle to bury those feelings deeper. Hurrying to the bathroom, I brush my teeth and wash my face. I take off the t-shirt with Basim’s bloody handprints, slip on a pair of jeans and a hoodie, then I put on boots and grab my coat. I head downstairs; I can hear Basim talking as I get closer.

“Hey Youngblood. C’mere. I wanna introduce you to my people.” I walk to where the group is standing. Basim places his hand on my shoulder. “Everybody, this is Youngblood. He’s family, make sure you treat him that way.” He then walks over to a nigga that looks like a lineman for the New York Giants. “And this man here,” he continues. “This is my main man Osom.” We all look at each other and nod. “Over here on the floor,” Basim points to where the woman had been laying. “This is my clean-up crew, Slim and Bruce.”

They both look up briefly, before going back to what they were doing. The woman’s body is gone. Slim and Bruce both have on rubber gloves and there’s a bucket near each of them. I don’t know what’s in that bucket, but whatever it is, it got the blood right up. The way they use those scrub brushes you can tell they’ve done this job before.

Osom put his hand on my shoulder. “Come on, let’s ride.”

I look at that big joker and think, *ride where?* I turn to Basim, trying to get an idea of what’s going on. He nods. So, I follow Osom outside. He walks toward a long blue car. I’m surprised because the car is plain. I figure anybody dealing with Basim would be rolling in something sharper than this. I notice something in the backseat of the car, but I can’t quite make it out. I get inside and turn to the backseat. There are two small plants that look like bushes. They are lying flat on the back seat. As we are riding, my mind roams. Why did Basim send me off with this nigga?

Osom must have felt my confusion. “What is it, Young one?”

I correct him. “That’s Youngblood.”

“Sorry lil’ nigga,” he laughs. “Okay. What is it Youngblood?”

I shake my head. “Nothing.”

“How do you expect to learn anything if you don’t ask any questions?”

I sit quiet for a moment, then I turn and look at Osom. “Where we goin’? And why did Basim send me off with you in the first place? Didn’t he think I could help with the clean up? And what’s up with this sorry ass car?”

Osom looks straight ahead for a minute, before giving a deep laugh.

“What?” I ask, irritated.

“First of all,” Osom begins. “You are helping with the clean-up. You and me, we’re driving to the next state. We’ll plant this bitch and head home, it’s a two-man job. Now the first flag for cops to stop yo’ ass, is to have a car full of niggas. The second flag is to be driving a luxury car.” He rubs the dashboard. “Betsy may not be fancy, but she’s dependable. She’ll get us where we need to go, and she blends in on the highway. That’s the key, Youngblood. When you’re doing dirt the last thing you want to do is bring attention to yourself.” He looks at me and smile, did that answer all your questions?”

I stare out the window. “For now.”

We drive for hours, stopping only to gas up and use the bathroom. I spend most of the trip sleeping. I wake up to see that we are pulling off the road. We drive a couple of miles into a wooded area. The night is darker than I’ve ever seen. Osom parks the car and tells me to get out. He pops the trunk and we both walk to the rear of the car. I smell the stench of the woman’s body before he opens the trunk. She is wrapped in plastic with tape at the ends and in the middle. It’s too

dark for me to see her face, which is alright with me. Osom grabs two shovels from the trunk and hands one to me. We walk over to a group of small trees and bushes. Osom points to one of the small trees. He tells me to start digging around it, while he digs around the bush next to it.

It has taken hours of digging to get to the root of the plants. Osom puts his shovel down and beckons for me to follow him. We walk back to the car, get the body out and carry it over to where we had been digging. We place the body on top of the bush roots. Osom raises his hand for me to follow him. We walk back to the car and remove the two plants we have been traveling with.

“Come on,” Osom says, his tone serious.

We grab the plants and head back to the digging site. Once there, we place several layers of dirt over the body. We then place the bushes on top of the body and cover the roots with more dirt. I stand there, amazed. The bushes we planted blends easily with the other bushes, it’s as if they have always been there. We grab our shovels and walk back to the car. Osom said our clothes, boots and even our boxers will be destroyed once we get back home.

As we drive off, Osom looks at me and smile. “You did good.”

I lower my head and close my eyes. I’m so sleepy.

CHAPTER 3

Before I know it the light of morning is waking me. Osom said we are about twenty minutes from home. I sit up, nervous. My sister is heavy on my mind. I try not to show how anxious I am, but Osom notices.

“Don’t worry lil’ man. You and your sister are family, and we always take care of family.”

I nod. But inside I’m strategizing how I can get Shauna away from all this. I can handle it and I know in time Shauna would be able to adjust as well. I don’t want her to. One lost soul is enough. I look out the window in a daze, not having any real organized thoughts. About fifteen minutes later, I see Basim’s house from the road. The closer we get I see two figures standing out on his terrace. It looks like Basim with some broad. They are hugging and kissing like crazy. I think to myself, *damn*, this nigga moves on fast. But, in a way I can understand it. Baby is bad as hell. I can’t see her face, but she has a fat ass. Osom read my mind.

“What you know about that, yo’?” He says, smiling.

I grin. “I know plenty. But I’m always ready to learn more.”

“I hear you brotha’. I hear you.”

We pull around back and park in the garage. I can hardly wait for the car to stop. I jump out and run inside the house. I’m running up the stairs, taking two steps at a time.

“Youngblood,” I hear Basim say.

I turn around and almost lose my balance. Shauna and Basim are wrapped around each other as if they were one person. I stand, my mouth open. I know this nigga is the shit. But messing with my sister! I am about to flip out - and Shauna - I hardly recognize her. The normal wavy hair is straight, with long bangs that almost cover one eye. She has on tight low-rise jeans and a crop top that ends right above her belly button. She looks ten years older.

Basim breaks the silence. "Follow me. I need to talk to you."

I look at Shauna, she lowers her head. I follow Basim with hard aggressive steps. I'm disappointed. In my mind I'm saying, '*who can you trust?*' I mean, I was only gone for one day.

We walk into the study and I'm looking at this joker like - Damn! I trusted you!

Basim takes a deep breath. "Have a seat Youngblood."

"I'm a'ight." I say, still standing.

He sighs. "I get it. I understand why you're upset. Hell, if I were in your shoes, I'd be ready to kill."

Stone faced, I look at him and think, *if I had a gun, I'd blow your head off.*

Basim clears his throat. "Sit your ass down lil' nigga, I need you to know, this was not my intention. You feel like family to me... I love you like a brother." He takes a deep breath. "It happened like this. Shauna was upset about the bullshit from yesterday and I felt bad snapping like that with her in the house, especially since she just left that kind of shit. I only went to her room to talk to her, calm her down. But we ended up laughing and talking for hours."

Still standing I make a sifting sound through my teeth. "A'ight, you wanted to calm her down. So, what's up with the hair and tight ass clothes?"

Conscience Choice

“Your sister said she wanted a change. She’s a young lady and wanted to look like one. She told me that in the past, she always wore a ponytail and baggy jeans. I offered to get her hair done, that’s it. We had already bought the clothes, remember?” His voice is developing an edge, so I back up.

“Basim, I appreciate everything you’ve done for me... for us. But my sister is the only family I have. I don’t want her to get in over her head.”

“I hear you,” his voice softens. “When I met your sister, I didn’t even look at her like that. Even though, I have to admit after I dropped her off at the hair salon and then picked her up,” he pauses. “She came out looking sharp as hell. I was blown away.” He quickly adds, “but I still didn’t come at her like that. Once we started talking... she has this energy, man. And she’s not a little girl, Youngblood. She’s a young woman. I know there’s an age difference. She’s sixteen and I’m twenty-six. But tell me, would you feel any different if she was twenty-one?”

“No, I wouldn’t like it. It has nothing to do with the age.”

“So, you think I would hurt her?”

I cup my hand over my mouth and pull at my lips. I tried to control my words, so I spoke slowly. “I saw you beat the life out of a woman... and for what? Stepping on your shoes, fucking with your money or just being a bitch? Well, what happens if Shauna gets bitchie? She’s never had a boyfriend, never been on a date. What happens when she fucks up?”

He grips his chin with the tip of his fingers and slides forward in his seat. “There’s more to that story than I want to get into right now. But trust me it was not some small shit that went down. Besides, Shauna’s not some bitch on the street or a gold digga’ with ass for sale. I’m not coming at her with game, and she doesn’t know any game.” He chuckles at the thought.

Thinking of my sister makes me smile too.

His face turns serious. “Yo, it’s hard to find someone you can trust, know what I mean? Somebody that’s down for more than your money or sweatin’ your reputation.” He puts his hands together, locking his fingers like one big fist. He lets out a long sigh. “It’s refreshing. She’s special to me. We want to take it slow and see where things go.” He places his hand behind his neck, as if he has a lot on his mind. “You know I will take care of your sister. If I have a dime, she has a nickel, know what I’m saying? I would quit fucking with her before I’d hurt her.”

I flop down in a chair and look at Basim with one eyebrow lifted.

He waves his hands. “Nah man,” he says. “All we did was kiss.” He looks out the window as if he’s reminiscing the kiss all over again.

I rub my finger down the side of my face and laugh nervously. “I’m just saying, in less than twenty-four hours you talking like you would give up half yo’ shit.”

He looks at me, and I see sadness in his eyes.

“I’m ready,” he says, looking back out the window.

I knew then this was out of my control. All I can do is watch and wait.

I stand up. “I have your word?”

He rose to his feet, extending his hand. “Word is bond, I will leave her alone before I hurt her. Are we cool soldier?”

We shake hands and bump shoulders. “We cool.”

Walking out the room I feel a sense of relief. Shauna is standing by the door nibbling on her fingers.

Basim kisses her forehead and whispers, “talk to your brother.” He disappears around the corner.

Shauna turns to me, “I’m sorry Shane, but---”

Conscience Choice

I place my hand to her mouth, stopping her mid-sentence. “I understand. But I need you to UNDERSTAND what you’re getting into. That man is not to be played with.”

Her eyes are gleaming. “I can’t explain it. I felt it the first time I saw him. I knew he was the one.” She frowns. “And I know he’s no joke. He does have more than one side, a side that he doesn’t allow everyone to see. Besides, I’m not as fragile as you think. We come from the same house, remember?”

“I hear you okay, but I wanna make sure you know, that the nigga is crazy.”

“Hmph, that’s the same thing I hear about you.”

“Whatever,” I say, with a faint smile. We hug.

“I love you Shane and I’ll be okay.” She takes a deep breath. “Don’t worry about me. I know a lot more than you think.” I step back and look at her. She smiles. “Be happy, lil’ brother. For once in our life, lets breathe and be happy.”

She let out a long deep sigh, as if she is letting go of everything that happened before today. I look at my sister as if I’m seeing her for the first time. The baggy clothes and ponytail are gone. I can understand how Basim got all caught up. My sister is something special.

I go upstairs to take a hot shower. I rub my hands across my face, thinking about everything that has happened in the last twenty-four hours. Maybe Shauna has a point. This is our last chance for something good or at least better. Hurrying out of the shower, I get dressed and bounce down the stairs with a determined attitude. Basim is waiting for me.

He removes the cigar from his mouth. “Ready to make some money?”

I breathe in. “Let’s do it.”

We drive to the projects and my mind is racing. Basim gives me a gun, he calls the Baby Eagle, it's heavy as hell. He explains my job again. We go over different situations and all the what if possibilities. My shift will be from six o'clock in the afternoon until after midnight. My heart is pounding, but I'm ready. He drops me off at the spot. I hide my gun in some bushes nearby and sit on the curb. I pull out a bag of sunflower seeds from my coat pocket and look across the street. I see Drake, the young kid I'm in charge of watching. His coat is bigger than he is. He has on a black parka and a black ski hat. The legs of his pants are stuffed inside his boots. When I look at that kid, I can't help but wonder what his home life is like. Is his moms a dope fiend? A prostitute? Or weak for foul men? I wonder what has forced him into the jungle. Then I remember what Basim said about letting go of my emotions. I quickly change my thoughts and concentrate on plans for myself.

The curb is getting cold, so I stand up and stretch my legs. The sun is still shining bright, that takes some of the bite out the air. The block is getting crowded. Drake is busy making money. Everything's good so far. No bullshit. I take notice when I see a dope fiend get loud with him, but lil' man handles himself well. I look up and down the block, watching all the activities. As cold as it is, some broads are still walking the streets half dressed. Further up the way, jokers are working the block. They are standing in the middle of the sidewalk yelling out names of different products: brain freeze, suicide. I laugh out loud. Where else can you stand on a crowded block and yell out the names of different drugs? The dope fiends are the only ones paying any attention. I don't know... the shit is kind of funny to me.

“You find it funny watching people kill themselves?”

I turn to see an older cat staring at me with a stern face. He's wearing sweatpants and a jacket. He has a pair of boxing gloves hanging over his shoulder and yellow hand-wraps wrapped around his hands. He's not wearing a bow tie, but I know he's one of those Muslim niggas. I don't want any beef with them muthafuckas. Muslims have much respect in the hood.

Conscience Choice

“Nah man,” I say, clearing my throat. “I was choking on these sunflower seeds.” I reach in my pocket grab the bag of seeds and raise them in the air. “No disrespect.”

“Young brother, as long as you assist in the poisoning of your people, the word respect should never come out your mouth.”

Damn, that’s cold. That nigga don’t know shit about me. Where were my people when me and Shauna were getting our ass kicked every day? Fuck it. I don’t love nobody BUT my sister. Fuck the fiends, ain’t nobody forcing shit on ‘em. If we didn’t sell it, somebody else would.

“Try seeing with your heart brother,” he says with a big smile.

He turns to walk down the sidewalk. I shake my head and get back to work.

I did the same routine every day for about seven months. After my shift, I would meet Basim at the café or hang out for a minute in the projects. Sometimes I would spend the night with Simone, she was 29 or 30, I think. I met her at a strip joint called the Big O. She liked to think that she’s teaching me how to fuck. She did know a lot of tricks though, but most of my time I spent working; it was the only thing that kept my mind clear. Basim said I was a natural.

He would joke that I was a steady muthafucka, shit didn’t shake me. Osom said he never saw anyone so young always look so damn serious. The few times I did laugh or joke around, it was with my family; Shauna, Basim and Osom. To everyone else I only had one look, and that look was *SERIOUS*. What the fuck, happy, mad, sad it’s all the same expression to me. But hey, my world created me. I wasn’t born this way. The thing is, when you grow up in a house full of violence and pain, you become immune to violence and pain. You either adjust and survive or find some way to forget. Most of our customers are muthafucka’s trying to forget their past pain. For me, the past makes me work harder. I will never be at the mercy of another muthafucka again. But the truth is, I have mad love for Basim, the

nigga gave me a lot of growing room. He trusted me with some major shit. And I always delivered.

As for Basim and Shauna, they're still going heavy. He's so shout out over Shauna, that he spends most of his time with her. But fuck up one time and you WILL see him. I felt every new job he gave me was a test to see how much I could handle. In the beginning niggas would try to question my way of doing things. All they saw was a young kid calling the shots. Eventually, I gained their respect. They learned really quick, that the worst enemy to have is a muthafucka that's not afraid to die. I live for this shit, even though it was hard in the beginning. Some lessons I had to learn the hard way. But it didn't take me long to learn the cost of one mistake.

It was about a month after I started my job as a watcher, a stick-up kid tried to rob one of the runners. He was around fourteen, the same age as me. And I got caught up in that familiar lost look in his eyes. So instead of blowing his ass away, I took his gun and told him to get the fuck outta there. I turned to leave and instantly felt a burning in the top of my chest. I looked down and saw a lot of blood pouring from my body. There was so much blood that I couldn't tell where it was coming from. I'm not sure if the things I remember were real or hallucinations. But I'll never forget the echoing sound of the wind. It's like when your ears pop. You can still hear, but it sounds like you're in a closed tunnel. I don't know how I got to the hospital. I was told a nurse's aide found me in the doorway of the emergency room. Someone had dropped me off and left. I was lucky. The bullet hit an artery in my shoulder. I lost a lot of blood and passed out. One moment of compassion could have cost me my life.

Basim found out who the stick-up kid was and gave me his name and address. I staked the place out and learned his family's routine. I found out his older brother was Ojo. I remembered him from Basim's meeting a month earlier. He was the one setting up runners to be robbed. This joker had fallen off his game. He was a straight up junkie, sniffing dope straight from the bag. I knew the whole family had to be dealt with.

Conscience Choice

On the night of pay back, I gave a dope fiend some free dope to go smoke with the family. I needed to know how many people were in the house. I watched the place all night, planning every detail in my mind.

Around two o'clock that morning, me and three of my niggas kicked down the door. The score was settled. From that point on my job became routine. I was always working.

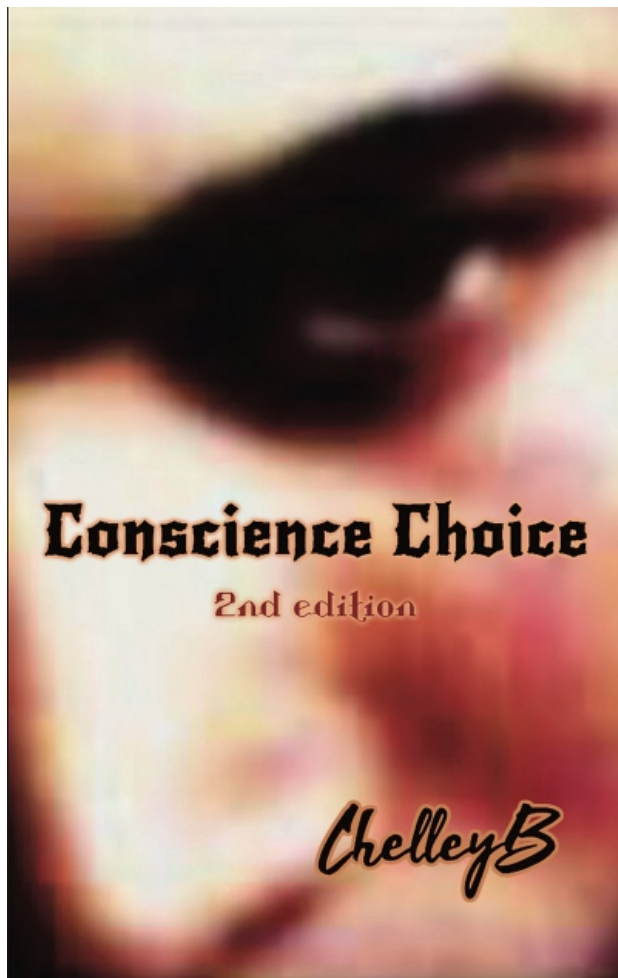
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