

There are some people you shouldn't mess with, especially if it puts your life in danger. The Capers are not to be toyed with, something Travis and Alvin regrettably begin to appreciate—but maybe it's a little too late?

Against the Grain

By Isaac Samuel Miller

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A MUST READ CRIME-MYSTERY TO DISCOVER HOW VICIOUS
A NEW MOB LURKING IN LOUISIANA CAN BE.

AGAINST THE GRAIN

A Novel

*On the run for their lives, bad decisions after bad decisions befall
an uncle and his nephew.*

ISAAC SAMUEL
MILLER

Against the Grain

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Chapter 1: Who Done It?

*January 2016
Houston, Texas*

It hasn't even been a month since someone tried to kill me. If they found my mom, then maybe I won't be as lucky the next time a hit is put out on me. I knew this day would come! I'm confident my mom was shot tonight because of me. I hope she doesn't die here tonight in this filthy hospital. Travis navigates through the hospital like a NASCAR driver. Most OGs from my old hood know that 'snitches get stitches'. He sighs. I knew this day would come after I snitched. I have to put a stop to The Capers, even if I die in the process. I've lost way too much because of those racist cowards.

Travis' heart is heavy like a building bearing the force of an earthquake, as he exits the elevator onto the third floor of the Riverdale Hospital. He speeds through civilian traffic during his desperate pursuit to locate his mother's room. Once he positions himself within twenty feet of his mother's room, he's taken aback by a developing scene unfolding before his teary eyes. He shyly observes the entire nurse's station in a lustful trance. With an intense girlish camaraderie, three young lady nurses are galvanized by Travis' handsomeness, coupled with his height, youth, and the darkness of his smooth black skin. They're fixated on his flawless skin that looks like it's fresh out of a mother's womb. His confident and mysterious presence mandates stares of admiration.

Travis naively pretends not to notice a beautiful blonde, White female who has a tanned and glossy complexion. He raises his right eyebrow as he observes the white lady sitting next to two attractive African American women. All three of the nurses' eyes shyly glance

at Travis as the palms of their hands heat up with a tinge of sweat. The ladies begin to perspire around their necks and chests due to his unmatched attractiveness.

Brenda, one of the Black nurses, loves the way her thick thighs look in her tightly fitted navy-blue scrubs. She stands up in a subtle attempt to capture Travis' attention as she writhes her body into an eye-grabbing position. Her body is contorted and frozen like an obelisk. Her left leg is bent, and her right arm is resting upon her right hip. She silently prays that her feminine charm is enough to captivate Travis' attention. She's confident he will yield to her alluring display as she stands behind her desk with a flirtatious countenance.

Darlene, the other Black nurse, addresses Brenda based on her knowledge of Brenda's personality. While glancing at Brenda's subservient and periodic stares, Darlene says: "Girl, I see the cutie too." She chuckles. "I'm sure you're aware that tall, skinny, and light-skinned Black women like me are in style now, right?"

Before Brenda has a chance to respond, Molly, a well-cultured White nurse, chimes in and places her hands on her chest out of disbelief as she says: "Darlene, I know Brenda isn't that tall, but men still love her. And trust me, I know—I've seen how men look at her." Molly rolls her light blue eyes into the back of her head as she faces Darlene and says: "And another thing, Darlene, don't get all into your feelings. I'm keeping it real."

Brenda smirks as she places her charting binder onto the nurses' station desk. "Darlene, it's apparent you're furious." She points to her shoes. "I can see your big toes curling up in those small shoes of yours." Molly rises to form a frozen stance resembling a cheerleader who has successfully executed their signature move, landing with a gorgeous smile. Darlene gently bites her bottom lip to hold back her

words as Travis walks by. Molly says to Travis: “Hey handsome, how may I help you?”

Travis turns in her direction to observe. She’s fine.

Despite the beauties present before his eyes, Travis’ lust is short-lived. He’s saddened by the unfolding events that are transpiring in his life. Within a matter of seconds, he starts to erase Darlene, Brenda, and Molly from his mind. As he inches closer to room 306, he pauses to gather his feelings of betrayal. The scene is clear of observers as he cries tears similar to an ocean’s waves. Several tears rush through his pupils like a massive waterfall. He acknowledges that he should gather his thoughts before entering his mother’s room. I really need to pull myself together, Travis thinks to himself.

Travis peeks inside his mother’s room before he enters. With his back turned to his mother, he places his hands atop his head while squeezing his skull like a deep tissue massage. Oh my God, she has so many bandages on, she looks like a zombie. I have to do something about this. With a heavy heart, he exits his mother’s room and walks into an empty waiting room.

While in the waiting room, Travis reaches into his wallet to pull out a dollar. He purchases a twenty-ounce Sprite from the vending machine. He sighs as the blissful sounds of the soda bottle opening prepares his dry throat for hydration. Travis gulps down half of the soda. After he expels a low volume burp, he looks to his left and right before sitting down in a blue chair. While endeavoring to relax his unsettling nerves, he starts to ponder the chilling events that led up to his mother’s shooting.

If I could go back in time—I would’ve done so many things differently. Travis sits back in the chair and places his soda on the

floor. He takes a deep breath and folds his arms across his chest as chilling events from the past slowly resurface inside his mind.

Chapter 2: An Author's Deadly Confession

Travis leans forward in the chair and interlocks his fingers to form one big fist. With his elbows resting atop his thighs, he places his thick knuckles underneath his chin. He sighs. Nearly thirteen years ago, I observed absolute carnage.

That fateful night continues to flood my mind with paranoia and fear. Thinking about it makes my hair stand up on the back of my neck. He twitches. The winter of 2003, for me, was a ghastly warzone. Back-to-back gunshots were all I heard. Although I've embraced new ventures in my life, I can't seem to shake off the loud noises that reside in my head. The cacophonous sound of bullets piercing human flesh still continues to rip apart my inner happiness. Every day, perpetually, I relive the live shootout; it was similar to a military battle. The sound effects of the shooter's ammunition, although inanimate, refuses to foster an option of reprieve for my mental well-being. The shots will not cease to ring throughout my eardrums. I have memories that continue to linger in my mind because of that grisly night of bloodshed. These memories live inside my mind like a dark shadow, following me no matter where I go.

Travis exhales. The shooter was vicious! I still remember exactly how the shooter stepped away from my friend's bodies as their life forces began to dissipate. The killer stepped away from my homeboy's souls with a wicked walk. The perpetrator's walk was chilling and devoid of human emotion. The assailant's hands were glued to his gun's trigger as he slowly crept away with an ominous stride. His disposition was that of a trigger-happy psychopath. The villain's walk depicted an individual who enjoyed watching the expiration of human lives. He releases an extended sigh while shaking his head. Just thinking about it gives me a sensation of trepidation.

Although I was hidden from the shooter's vantage point, I was close enough to faintly hear his voice. Ironically, he had a serene voice. Then my ears stiffened, right before I received the attacker's soft and hateful voice. I will never forget The Springfield Avenue Shooter's words:

“You thought that you could get over on us and put us out of business?”

Even from a distance, I could hear the villain chuckle. He released murderous scoffs like someone who had a thirst for blood. I still think he's related to Satan himself. After I overheard his terror-filled aspersions, I observed him kneel down with what appeared to be an obscure, cold-hearted grin. He attempted to shoot one of my friends again. But fortunately, I heard the sounds of serenity—his magazine clip was empty. It was obvious, at least to me, that he had some type of disdain toward Black people. It was the way that he delivered his words. And his dog whistles were very clear too.

I feel terrible. He scoots back and then leans forward in the chair and rubs his face out of despair. I'm the reason why my poor mother is in this hospital. In a low tone, Travis mutters: “Things didn't go as planned.”

He stands up and wrestles with whether he should leave the hospital without speaking to his mother. While standing, he pauses for a few seconds and dries his silent tears with his hands. He turns around and glances at the Sprite bottle on the floor and then he tosses his hands into the air. Ahh, screw it, maintenance will get it. I have bigger fish to fry. As he starts to exit the waiting room, he sighs and says out loud: “I can't do this tonight.” He rubs his face and pinches his lips together. I need a few days to clear my head. It's too hard seeing my mom fight for her life like this. I have to go back to the hotel to rehash everything. I really need to plan my next move.

Travis exits the hospital and drives back to The Marriott Hotel in Houston. While sitting on the bed with underwear on, he leans forward and snorts a white powder off the nightstand that's adjacent to the hotel's bed. Minutes later, he's distraught and high from a cocaine rush, which inhibits his ability to recall important details in chronological order. While still sitting up, his eyes begin to roll into the back of his head. Suddenly, he falls back onto the bed, rubs his nose, and coughs. "I think 2015, is when everything went downhill."

December 2015

Baton Rouge, Louisiana

11:00 pm

The Louisiana Country Club

Travis desperately clings to his life while lying on the asphalt inside his affluent community. As million-dollar homes, generational wealth, and fortune surround him, he begins to slip in and out of stable levels of consciousness. Travis looks up to ascertain how he went from the asphalt to his wounded body resting atop his patio. He regains consciousness and picks up his cellphone near his body and dials 911. After dialing 911, he slips into a state of unconsciousness, grabbing his gunshot wounds.

A few minutes later, he's awakened by a woman dressed in a black pantsuit. She shows him her detective badge while standing over him. The detective starts applying pressure to Travis' wounds and then she quickly glances at an odd-looking shell casing to her right as Travis screams: "Ouch, you're being too rough!"

"Sorry! Do you recognize me? Do you remember who shot you?" The detective's questions begin to escape Travis' consciousness as several thoughts run through his mind. His inner thoughts overshadow the detective's questions. *No one knew how I was going to do it, not even Sandy.* Travis releases an elongated gasp for a breath of air.

Slowly, tiredness pulls his eyes closed, and with a thrumming pulse, he drops his wrists. Travis lays motionless for several seconds before waking up once more to embrace a sharp intake of pain, only to observe that the detective is gone.

Travis slowly lifts his head and looks around as more police officers rush to his aid. The sight of several policemen, coupled with his remembrance of one of the officers, sends an adrenaline rush through his body as he ponders: I think, I recognize that lady detective now. He rubs his eyes and closes them and then he reopens his eyes. Yeah, the one that showed me her badge earlier. She looked so familiar—she has such a manly build. He squints his eyes. Things just got complicated because that can't be who I think it is, can it? A-Wall can't be a cop?

Travis' confused thoughts revert back to his injuries. He glances at his wounds and realizes that he is shot more times than he can count. He notices two additional gunshots to his right leg and left shoulder. He experiences an intense desire to tell the other officers what he knows. The footsteps of several policemen running around continue to flood his eardrums. He is skeptical about the detective that's present. Due to skepticism, Travis decides to explore the risk of dying without the possibility of living to see justice served. I just want this all to be over.

Travis coughs up a little blood as he hears sirens from the ambulance approaching. God, let me die so I can finally rest in peace. His blood pressure continues to falter. He is in and out of consciousness. The moment I felt bullets piercing my flesh tonight, I knew then that my dream of publishing my first traditional novel was compromised. Now, I finally understand why Mr. Comeaux tried his best to instill his wise words into my heart: "Travis, if you release this novel, I fear you might become the third tragedy in your book."

I always wondered, what surfaced throughout the minds of victims of violent crimes as they faced the reality of their imminent demise. I would've never thought during this winter night in 2015, on New Year's Eve, that I would be faced with a similar fate. Tonight, must be connected to my uncle. I really wish Uncle Al had spilled the beans. He should've come clean and told the cops the truth back in 2003. If only I could've surmised that things would've ended up like this tonight, I would have done a lot of things differently. I wish I could go back in time and alter how things began. We all were so young.

Travis temporarily fades back into a state of unconsciousness. A few seconds later, the paramedics load Travis' wounded body onto a stretcher as he wrestles with his intuition of not trusting anyone present at the crime scene. A medium-sized Chinese paramedic, who is about five-ten in height, with slanted eyes and a bald head overhears Travis' blunder as he states two names out loud: "Kevin and Jermaine—"

As the ambulance drives away to take Travis to the hospital, his adrenaline begins to pump after he realizes that he blurted out Jermaine and Kevin's names. He sighs. Kevin and Jermaine were eighteen and I was only thirteen. We were teenagers living the lives of American gangsters, and Uncle Al was the only adult in our clique. Stealing, killing, and selling drugs were among the many things I witnessed from those clowns.

If everything went as planned, maybe my fate would've been different tonight. If I didn't feel my life slipping away and if I had the strength to talk, I would inform the female detective of my connection to my uncle.

Suddenly, Travis begins to remember things about his suspicions of the detective present at the crime scene. I think the detective already knows. But I'm the real one to blame. I wish that Uncle Al hadn't been so idealistic in his thinking. He coughs up a speck of blood. I know

my shooting tonight has to be connected to The Springfield Avenue Shooting, especially since the shooter still hasn't been detained. The perp must've read my book. But how did the shooter find out about me? He grimaces. None of this is adding up.

In a daze, Travis remembers details about the person who shot him. The detective has the same build as the shooter, but she can't be the shooter because she's much younger than the person I saw on that fateful night when my friends were shot. And she's a woman who has long, blonde hair. He grunts and lifts his eyebrows. I'm uncertain, now that I think about it because I think the shooter was a man. He sighs. I don't know, it's the long hair that's confusing me. Because a man can have long hair too. My attacker tonight caught me off guard, so I wasn't able to get a really good look at their face. However, I did notice their hair color and physique. The only thing I heard when I woke up from being unconscious was the detective saying: "Your vault is open and it's empty. What was in there that the assailant wanted?" Travis grabs his stomach. Only my novel was in the vault.

Upon finding Travis, Detective Shelby continues to surveil his patio surroundings before she enters his home. Once inside, she walks upstairs while Travis lies in his backyard covered in blood. Detective Shelby quickly surveils the crime scene to ensure that the assailant is gone. After she ensures the coast is clear, she rushes onto the patio to address Travis' wounds. She applies pressure until the EMS arrives.

Shelby decides to take advantage of every instance to question him, in case he does not survive. She takes several deep breaths as she continues to apply pressure to his wounds. "Was that your only copy? Do you have the novel saved anywhere else? Have you emailed samples to anyone? If so, tell me where they are." She starts to look

around after hearing other police units arrive. She refocuses her attention onto Travis. “I fear that others might be in danger too, especially since it seems like the villain shot you over your novel,” says Shelby.

Travis is in a fetal position on his side as he holds the lower portion of his abdomen. He stutters and replies: “No, Detective.” He grimaces from his pain. “No one else has a copy but me.”

Perfect. Shelby lifts her eyebrows. “That makes me feel good, Travis.” Shelby temporarily releases the pressure and leans in closer to Travis. “Now, I need you to tell me where the novel is so that no one else gets hurt. Where is it?”

While struggling to speak, Travis says: “I know it’s only a matter of time before my heart stops beating.” Shelby looks around, hearing several footsteps quickly approaching behind her.

“Ma’am, please, step aside,” screams one of the paramedics. Shelby stands up and steps away from Travis as the paramedics rush to his aid. They load his body onto the stretcher while Travis releases an outburst of screams from the intense pain of his injuries.

Shelby positions herself behind the paramedics’ and walks with them as they roll Travis toward the van. She abruptly stops following them as she receives a phone call. She glances at her cellphone and scoffs. I bet you that’s him. Like clockwork, he’s probably calling in for an update. I’ll return his call in a second. She resumes her attention to the scene at hand. She leans her left shoulder against the open door at the back of the ambulance and observes the care team loading Travis into the van.

While Travis is in the back of the ambulance, one of the paramedics says: “Don’t give him any more morphine. He’s starting

to hallucinate,” says the muscular, Black paramedic who lifted Travis onto the stretcher by himself.

A few seconds later, the paramedics’ close the doors of the van, and they drive away, leaving Shelby amid the darkness of the streets as she rubs her chin, watching the van drive up the street. I should follow them. She runs to her car to head over to the hospital.

A few minutes later, the ambulance arrives at Our Lady of the Lake Hospital and the care team rushes Travis inside for emergency surgery.

Detective Shelby runs inside the hospital to observe the hospital’s personnel.

Before the paramedics meet up with the emergency room doctors, Shelby overhears the Asian paramedic say: “Code Blue!”

Shelby observes the doctors rush out of the hospital and start to cut open Travis’ clothes to prepare him for surgery. I need Travis, and I need his novel to protect him. She stands motionless with her arms crossed. I thought for sure his novel was in the vault. I can’t retire until I solve this puzzle. She looks to her right near the parking lot. Here Charles comes. He sent me a picture of a possible suspect while I followed the ambulance. She pulls out a picture from her pocket of a person of interest. She glances to her right and notices Lieutenant Charles Miles approaching with stealth. His dark brown, bald head is flawless as it sets atop a fit body that’s hosted by a middle-aged male. With a navy-blue suit on, he continues to take steps forward as his body language conveys a sense of urgency.

Charles begins to walk toward Shelby as she erupts with a slew of emotions. She places her hands on her face and says: “No, no, no! I need him to identify whether the picture I’m holding in my hand is A-

Wall.” She glances at the picture. “Travis might be the only surviving victim of A-Wall.” She sighs. Shelby realizes her reaction is unnatural as she consciously finishes her outer expression inwardly. Yes, that lunatic. I really need Charles to stay out of the loop, and he’s walking my way now.

She quickly walks inside the hospital while looking over her right shoulder. Charles will follow. Once inside, she quickly approaches the receptionist’s desk. Shelby through her peripheral vision to her right and notices Charles walk through the double doors of the hospital. She hits the receptionist's desk with her hands. “Travis, don’t die on me now! You’re the only person who can identify the killer of The Springfield Avenue Shootings.”

Charles’ pursuit is interrupted by a telephone call. He is only a couple of feet away when Shelby hears his phone ringing. Great, that might be the distraction I need. She smirks. Now is my time to exit. I don’t know if I got rid of all the evidence at the crime scene that could potentially link things back to me. She looks up at the ceiling and sighs. I really need to head back over there, like ASAP.

Shelby begins to walk toward a nearby door that leads to another hallway. She observes Charles pause and answer his phone near the hospital’s emergency entrance. With his back facing her, she departs through an adjacent exit, walking briskly. If I call Charles right now, it’ll interrupt his current phone call, helping to ease any suspicions just in case the other officers find something I might’ve left at the crime scene. She calls Charles Miles. The phone line rings a few times, and her heart rate increases as a tinge of sweat moisturizes her hands. While walking rapidly outside the facility, Shelby thinks: Come on, pick up.

Charles Miles answers his phone; he sighs then asks: “Hey, where are you?”

She pauses in another section of the hospital, out of the view of Charles, and looks around to ensure that he doesn't see her. She elevates her voice. While ignoring Charles' question, she sighs and yells: "Lieutenant!"

"Yes?"

The sounds of a door swinging opening and then closing echoes in the background as Shelby exits the hospital. She looks over her shoulders. "I have to get to the bottom of this Springfield Mystery. I feel in my gut that The Springfield Avenue Shooter from New Orleans is definitely A-Wall," says Shelby.

"Continue."

"I think A-Wall is responsible for The Country Club Shootings here in Baton Rouge too."

"Yeah, that might be the case. I don't see you inside the hospital anymore."

She stops walking and crosses her fingers. Here goes nothing. "I need to head back to the crime scene to double-check and ensure that I didn't miss anything."

"Shelby—"

"Look, I know you want to debrief right now but time is of the essence. I believe that The Springfield Avenue Shooting and The Country Club Shootings were racially motivated." She exhales.

He chuckles. "Despite the overwhelming evidence supporting that these crimes were solely gang and drug-related?"

"Lieutenant, I just know in my gut that A-Wall is connected to

Alvin's case. And now possibly Travis' murder too." "What evidence do you have?" Charles asks.

He won't know who put it there. "Well, the crime scene looks similar to his other crimes. I noticed a distinctive looking shell casing and it had a craved letter on it. And we both know that's A-Wall's MO."

"I see your angle now. Great observation."

She takes a deep breath. "I really hope that Travis doesn't die because he might be our last chance to catch A-Wall."

"Agreed! To solve these crimes, we must go against the grain."

Chapter 5: **Let the Truth be Told**

As the sun rises into the morning sky, it beams down through Alvin's Mustang. Fresh air enters the car through the ajar passenger window. The sound of vehicles driving atop the bridge echo and vibrate through the car. Dionne still has her nightgown on, and Travis is still dressed in pajamas.

Listening to the sound of engines roaring, they are driving at a steady pace on interstate I-10 heading to Lake Charles. Dionne is frantic as she reflects on Alvin possibly watching the video of what happened to Troy at Jim's place. She rests her fingers on the side of her head and leans into the driver's door. While sniffing the stench of her musty armpits and morning breath, she contorts her nose, while glancing at Travis (who is sleeping like a baby). She smiles and rubs his left thigh and says out loud: "Both of us are stinky." She continues to glance back and forth at Travis while being overcome by her feelings of trepidation dangling inside her like a pendulum. Right now, is a terrible time for Alvin to find out the truth. She slams her right hand against the steering wheel and accidentally honks the horn.

The blare of the car horn tears her from her thoughts and wakes

Travis. "Mom, where are we?"

"We are passing through Lafayette," says Dionne.

Travis looks around and wipes the crust from his eyes. "Lafayette?"

She smiles as she presses on the gas pedal only to drive three miles an hour. "Yes, Lafayette, Travis. I know your dad and I never took you

anywhere, but I promise you that will change soon. This whole experience has taught me what really matters in life.”

He looks to his left at his mom and yawns while saying: “Mom, I feel bad about what happened to Dad.” He sinks his head into his chest and his young tears wet the top of his pajamas. “Mom, who’s going to be my daddy now?” Travis is fully engulfed by tears dripping down his cheeks.

Dionne holds her hand over her chest and her lips begin to tremble. Tears explode out of her eyes like a tsunami. “Baby, you know it does something to your mom whenever you cry. I know you loved your dad and I loved him too. Your daddy got caught up in some things that really changed him. I should’ve helped him out more, but it was hard for me to go to work.”

He leans over and wipes his mother’s tears. She grabs his right hand and presses it against her right cheek. She kisses the tears atop his hand and listens to his question: “Why was it hard for you to work?”

She sighs as she grips the steering wheel. “Sometimes, I hear voices of people who aren’t there. I have to take pills, sometimes, to make the voices go to sleep so they don’t bother me anymore. I have schizophrenia.” She glances at him.

Travis looks confused. “Schizophrenia? Is that why you were acting strange in the living room, right before you shot, Dad?” He raises his eyebrows. “Mom, what’s that?”

“How do I explain this.” She glances back and forth at him and the traffic ahead. “It causes me to hear voices. To be honest with you, I feel like I can work. But if I go to work, the government will stop sending my SSI check. And your mommy needs her money.”

“So, let me get this straight, Mom. The government sends you a—”

I really don't want to share any more about my condition. I thought I was ready but I'm not. I'll just make sure I take my medication regularly so that I'll remain stable around my boy. I still don't know why I allowed myself to slip up with Troy. I guess a part of me wanted him gone or maybe I'm just nuts? Good, perfect distraction. “Oh wait, honey!” She turns the radio up. Travis, that's Lil' Bow Wow's new single. I know you like him a lot, he's your favorite rapper, right?” Travis smiles and nods his head as he hesitates before he starts to bounce his head up and down to the beat.

Thank you, Jesus, for distracting my boy. Dionne laughs. “Ha-ha, Baby, you don't know what real rap is. Now Tupac, Biggie, and Jay-Z are some heavyweights. But I guess Lil' Bow Wow will do for people your age.”

While rocking his shoulders side-to-side, Travis looks at Dionne and says: “Mom, don't you talk about Lil' Bow Wow like that. I like Lil' Bow Wow. He's, my favorite! Whoa, Mom, why are you crying?”

She holds her hand over her mouth. “I'm fine, Baby, just keep on dancing. Do that for me, please.”

“Okay. I love you, Mom.”

She stumbles over her words because of her tears. “I love you too, baby boy!”

Dionne cries over the next two minutes as she ponders: Travis, I'm so happy that you're still alive. Things could have really gotten out of hand with the ordeal a few hours ago. I don't know what I would do without my baby boy. I'm dedicated to becoming the best mom I can be for you. All I could think about was you dying. Dionne's thoughts are interrupted as several cars honk their horns.

“Mom, are you okay?” asks Travis.

Dionne jumps.

“Yes, Honey.” She glances at the cars behind her through the rearview mirror. “Okay, okay. I’m going!” She shakes her head and scoffs. “I swear, I hate driving.” She glances at Travis. “I wish you were old enough to drive because I would definitely let you take the wheel right now.”

Travis leans forward out of excitement and accidentally bumps the glove compartment; it falls forward like a door falling off of its hinges. He smiles and says: “Let me drive, please?”

“Boy, I was playing. We barely escaped with our lives today. It wouldn’t make much sense to jeopardize our lives again by letting you kill us.” Dionne grins.

“Very funny, Mom. I wouldn’t kill us. I drive cars all the time whenever I play Grand Theft Auto.” He sticks his chest out. “I’m a seasoned veteran when it comes to driving.”

“Travis, because you drive well on a video game doesn’t mean you’re a good driver in the real world. Trust me when I say, if I let you drive right now, we would end up in the water that we are driving over. We all have to crawl before we can walk.”

“We can start with my first crawling lesson today after we make it to Lake Charles,” says Travis.

She shakes her head and smiles. “Travis, you really know how to make your mommy smile. I will give you your first driving lesson later tonight.” Travis smiles as he jumps up and down in his seat.

“Thanks, Mom! I’m so excited, I can’t wait. I’ve always wanted to learn how to drive a car. Candace is going to really like me now.”

Her eyes expand. “What did you say? Who’s Candace?”

Travis laughs as he slowly shifts his eyes away from his mom. “I was just playing around.”

She lowers the radio volume. She smirks. “Travis, you can stop lying through your teeth. I’m your mother, and you know I know you better than anyone. I think it’s cute that you have a little crush.”

Travis grimaces. “I don’t have a little crush, Mom. I mean, she doesn’t even know I like her. I’m too shy to tell her. But, after she sees me driving, she’s going to fall right into my arms. I know it!”

“If a girl likes you only because you can drive, then I’m here to tell you today that she’s not the right one for you.”

He shifts his body to his left and bends his left knee. With his left leg resting atop the passenger seat, he says: “No, no! I don’t mean to drive a car. Mom, I want to own one as well. That’s what I want for my birthday next month. I want a brand-new red Corvette.”

She laughs. “Travis, you’re so funny. Where do you think I will get that kind of money from? Last time I checked, money doesn’t grow on trees.”

Travis taps on his left calf with his fingers. “You can buy it with the stash that Alvin hid in Baker.”

She frowns as she gently presses on the pedal. “No! And don’t you ever think like that again. I’m not messing with whomever your dad was involved with. Obviously, they’re some dangerous people.” “Mom, I want to have big money like a gangster, I’m tired of being poor.”

She takes a deep breath. This hood life is really affecting my boy. She glances at Travis. “Don’t get any ideas about selling drugs and

being a gangster just because they make a lot of money. Remember, most of them either end up in prison or dead.”

“If that’s the case, Mom, then why were you with my dad? Didn’t you know he was a gangster?”

“Normally, I would’ve slapped-you-upside-your-head! However, what you asked is a great question. It shows me that you’re thinking. Look at what happened to your dad and look at what almost happened to us tonight. Besides, I still don’t know what’s going to happen with your uncle Alvin. Trust me, that gangster life isn’t a life worth living or investing your gifts into. I thought that you like to write?”

“I don’t like writing, Mom; I love writing! I’ve read all R.L. Stine’s Fear Street books. They’re so good! I like his Goosebumps books too. But Stephen King is my favorite.” He smiles. “After I finish reading a book, I always try to write a similar short story of my own.”

She grins. “That’s amazing!”

Travis starts to squeeze and rub his thighs together. “Mom, can we stop by a gas station or something? I really have to pee.”

“Yeah, that’s fine. The GPS shows we only have about five more minutes before we arrive at your uncle Al’s house. Can you hold out until then?” She glances to her left. “Wow!” She looks at Travis.

Travis nods his head. While staring out of the window, he says: “Lake Charles seems kind of boring and small.” He looks out into the city of Lake Charles to observe a street loaded with convenience stores and boutiques. The city reminds him of a deserted town with open roads that’s inundated with single driving lanes. “Baton Rouge is much bigger than Lake Charles, right?”

“Yes, it is. Travis, hand me my phone charger, please. It is in my purse below your legs. I need to call Alvin and give him an update.”

“Mom, do you think Uncle Al will be okay?”

“I don’t know, which is why I’m fearful for his life.”

“Why don’t we call the police?”

“Now, you know we can’t call the police and put them in our business. Besides, Jim told Alvin that if he got the police involved, he would kill all of us. So, don’t discuss this matter with anyone. And that includes your buddies, Jermaine and Kevin. I don’t know why they like hanging out with you anyway. They’re so much older than you.”

He shrugs his shoulders. “They told me they used to work for Alvin.”

She exits the interstate. She frowns. “Travis, are you selling drugs?”

“No, Mom. That’s preposterous.”

She smiles. “My little writer, using those fancy words on me. I’m just making sure.”

A few minutes later, Dionne and Travis pull up in the driveway of Alvin’s home in Lake Charles.

She turns the engine off and smiles, rubbing Travis’ back. “Sweetheart, we made it.” Something that Travis said reenters her mind. “Wait, what do you mean by ‘they used to work for Alvin’? I’ve never known your uncle Alvin to have a steady paying job, which makes me think he might be a drug dealer too. Your uncle is secretive, so he wouldn’t have told me anything.” Maybe that’s his big elaborate

idea, to sell more drugs than he has ever sold before in a short period of time.

Travis elevates his shoulders while tilting his head.

Dionne steps out of Alvin's car and helps her son out. Together, they walk toward the front door. She fumbles in her purse for the house keys Alvin had given her.

Travis points to the door. "C'mon, Mom, open it. I can't hold my pee in any longer." Travis rocks side-to-side as his bent knees show signs that he's on the verge of quelling to his filled bladder.

"Ha-ha, look at you, dancing around like Chris Brown. You can't hold your pee a little longer?"

He frowns. "Mom, now is not a good time. If you haven't noticed, I'm having a crisis here. I really need to use the restroom. I appreciate your humor. Please, open the door."

"Okay, Mr. Pee Head," says Dionne.

"Ugh! Stop it, Mom!"

Dionne turns the knob and opens the door. Travis runs inside like a racehorse. Both of them are startled by the pristine look of Alvin's home.

"Wow, look how tall his ceilings are. Travis, I found a bathroom over here."

Travis rushes to use the bathroom. After he finishes, he exits the bathroom and entertains thoughts of Alvin being rich. He spins in a circle with his arms wide open. "Wow, Alvin's house almost looks like the houses on MTV Cribs." Dionne is standing in the dining room staring at Alvin's glass dining table and the expensive abstract farm

paintings hanging from his walls. She peers through the open view of his wide, tall windows and overhears Travis say: “Wow, Alvin must be rich! Mom, this is a nice house. Look at the tile on the floor and check out this gigantic fireplace. This looks nothing like his house in Baton Rouge.”

Dionne holds her right hand up and gallops quickly toward the front door. “Hold that thought, Travis! I’m going to run to the car and get my phone off of the charger. I really need to call your uncle.” How can he afford a place like this? He has a lot of explaining to do.

Dionne walks outside. Things aren’t adding up. Where would Alvin get the money to afford a place like this unless his brother gave him the money? This place is two hours away from his turn-around-jobs. I know that his odd jobs aren’t reliable, but they do pay well. She looks back at the house while walking to the car. Still, those jobs aren’t paying him this well. This place looks like it’s a million dollars.

She walks over to the car and opens the door. She picks up her cellphone and calls Troy’s number as a result of her habitual routine. While standing motionless, she listens to Troy’s voicemail as a form of solace. She sits down on the driver’s seat with the door wide open. She places her elbows atop her thighs and leans forward as Troy’s deep voice echoes through her ears. “What’s up? It’s your boy, Troy. You know what to do. If this is a GW, hit me in the other place where I can be reached. Peace out!”

GW must stand for Ground Watcher. It just dawned on me that the other place he’s referring to is a cellphone. Whenever I asked him about this, he was always vague. I never thought much of this at first because I thought he was referring to a physical location, like maybe Alvin’s place. I’m certain of my suspicion, considering everything that just happened. She rubs her chin. Wow, I didn’t know my own

boyfriend like I thought I did. Things are getting really crazy around here. She stands up and starts to cry. I miss you, Troy.

Less than two minutes later, she calls Alvin's phone.

Alvin picks up. "Hey, what's up? Y'all made it to my crib?"

"We made it about twenty minutes ago. Alvin, I need you to keep it real with me. Are you aware that Troy has another cellphone?"

"I am. I've tried to reach him on both of his phones, but I haven't been able to get in touch with him." She scoffs. I knew it.

As Dionne listens to Alvin, she starts to ponder. I can't tell him that I killed his brother.

She exhales. "I haven't been able to get in touch with him either, but I'm sure he will call you back soon."

"Well, I sure hope he does. I was hoping he had another stash of money somewhere. I need more so I can buy a major load from Binky.

Speaking of, he's calling me right now. Let me hit you back, okay?"

She sighs. "Okay but call me right back. I have some important questions to ask you. And I want to tell you the truth about something." She looks up into the sky. Lord be with me.

"Alright, sounds good. I only have about four hours remaining before I meet up with Jim, so I really need to take this call. I need to see if my plan will at least stall Jim from putting us in body bags. If Jim kills us, he'll definitely use Travis as a Corner Holder."

She sighs with her left hand resting atop her hip. "Corner Holder?"

"Yeah, Corner Holder!"

Dionne blinks in surprise as the phone suddenly cuts out, leaving her with only the sounds of a dial tone.

Alvin quickly returns Binky's call.

"Come on, come on! Binky, pick up the phone. You called me, man. Come on, bro, my life is at stake." I'll send him a text and let him know it's urgent.

Hey man, I got caught up in some major heat. If I don't get a big drop from you today, I won't be around tomorrow. I got into some trouble with The Capers.

Jim is going to put a hit out on me for sure unless I come through.

While holding the steering wheel with his left hand, Alvin glances at his phone screen as it lights up with Binky's name.

"Thank God, I'm so happy you called me back, bro. I'm running out of time."

"Alvin, what's going on, man? I thought you would never get involved with The Capers?" Binky asks.

"Trust me, I don't want to be involved, but I am—" He sighs. "Troy got into some trouble with them, and they abducted Dionne and Travis. I've managed to get them out of harm's way for now. I had to smoke one of his men, though. He was going to shoot Dionne."

"Whoa-whoa, so you smoked one of The Capers and you're still breathing?"

"Jim doesn't know. I fed him a fake story. I made something up and I made it sound good. I have a meeting with him in about four

hours. Look, I'll come clean with you. I robbed my brother and stole half of his product yesterday when he left his vault open in his attic."

Alvin sighs as he hears Binky say: "You were wrong for that, Al."

"I know, I know! The stuff we lifted into the attic was heavy, so we ended up dropping one of the bags. That's when I saw the cocaine and cash fall out. Troy told me to turn the other way and not to question him. After we finished up in the attic, Troy had too much to drink, and he passed out. Dionne and Travis were away at that time. I went back upstairs, and I stole all the cocaine and some of the cash. I knew he would eventually notice, but I figured he wouldn't think it was me. Besides, I was going to replace it tenfold within a couple of weeks."

Binky chuckles. "Alvin man, you bugging, bro. That's messed up what you did. And how would he not know that it was you who stole it since you were the only person with him during that time?"

Alvin exits off the interstate and pulls into a gas station. "I know, I know. I texted him what I did a few hours before Dionne showed up at my house, but he never responded. I've called him several times too. I don't know if he has checked on his stash yet. It hasn't even been twenty-four hours since I did what I did. I'm going to make it right, Binky."

"You better or The Capers will get rid of you and your whole family."

Alvin sighs as he pumps gas into the tank. He leaves the pump's handle inside the tank, locking the latch in place to fill up without applying constant pressure with his hands. Then, he crosses his arms and leans against Joe's truck. "I was going to start my own thing a few days after I took the cash, but Dionne and Travis showed up early this morning. That's how I knew that Troy discovered what I did."

“Wait, so Troy never questioned you?”

“No, like I said, I stole his product less than twenty-four hours ago. Dude, you still can’t remember anything.” He shakes his head and places the pump back on the latch. He gets back into the truck and drives away.

Binky laughs. “Hey, don’t start with the jokes. Are you sure that one of The Capers didn’t put a cap in him?”

Alvin stops at a red light and interlocks his hands like he’s praying. “I don’t think so. Dionne and Travis would’ve told me.”

“Maybe they don’t know The Capers did it. You need to find Troy. I’m sure he can help you. I already see where this is going.” Binky sighs. “Honestly, I don’t want to be a part of this mess, Alvin. One thing I’ve learned is not to mess with The Capers. I’m sorry, but you’re on your own bro.”

“Bro, please, at least hear me out! Now is not the time to turn your back on me. I have a plan that’s going to work for all of us.” Alvin exhales. “I promise you, if you listen to my plan, you will be interested. Everything will pan out, okay?”

“Alright, you-my-dude. Go ahead, I’m listening.”

Alvin forms a fist and tosses his right hand into the air like he won a game. “Okay, I owe Jim fifty-grand in cash and one mil in product. I shipped some of the product off to California already. I wanted to make a quick investment deal with some mob bosses out there. C-Thang hit me up on Facebook not too long ago. He told me he was running an operation in Los Angeles. He mentioned if I wanted in on it, he would connect me with some people that could really put me up on the game.”

“Hold on, you are jumping from story to story, who is C-Thang?”
“Chip Gibson from high school, remember? He moved away a few years back. We worked a lot of turn-around-jobs together. The Labor Union kept us together because our employers said we worked well together.”

“Yeah, yeah, okay, yeah, I remember that fool now! He was quiet, though. How did he get connected with the big dogs? And you still ain’t telling me nothing. What do you need me to do? You’re beating around the bush. Straight up though, I don’t like the fact that you stole from your own brother. Fools get capped for stuff like that, Al. But you know, I know you, so if you did what you did, I know you have some type of plan in place. You’ve always been the smartest dude I know. Continue, but make it quick.”

As Alvin pulls into Binky’s driveway, he senses Binky’s hesitation on the other end of the phone. “Wait, is that you pulling up to my pad, right now? Dude, I didn’t tell you to come over here. And you got a new truck?”

Alvin hangs up and jumps out of Joe’s truck. He approaches Binky who is sitting on his front porch dressed in a cheetah robe that covers his four hundred pounds of human flesh. When Binky sees Alvin, he pulls his comb out of his tall afro while his left hand remains inside the red gym shorts, he has on. Alvin greets him with a special handshake that they established in high school. After dapping one another down, they give each other a bro hug.

Alvin meanders in a circle. “Alright, Binky, so here’s the deal. Chip got tired of working for the union and getting laid off. He couldn’t find work and you know it’s hard for us to find jobs because of the thing that Chip and I got caught up in during high school with G-Baby and Man-Man.”

“Yeah, that was messed up how G-Baby sold y’all out when y’all got busted with weed,” says Binky.

“Yeah, we all did a couple of years in prison, except G-Baby. Ever since then, it’s been hard to find work with our criminal records. You know how hard it is for a Black man, especially if he’s done time.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“Chip got tired of trying to do the right thing while being treated like a villain because of his past. So, he decided to reconnect with Man-Man.”

“What are G-Baby’s and Man-Man’s real names again?”

Alvin pauses and faces Binky. They both sit down on the steps. “Garvin and Emanuel. I heard Garvin is in protective custody because he knows Man-Man wants him gone. Protective custody is for cowards!” He gives Binky a fist bump. “Dude’s a straight up dastard.”

“Whoa, bro, don’t come around here using those big words on your boy. Dastard, what does that mean?”

“It means that he’s a coward.” Alvin shakes his head. “When I found that out, I was like really? Protective custody? Real Gs don’t fool with the cops like that.”

Binky looks around and closes his robe. He points his right thumb toward the back of his house. “Look, let’s go in the backyard and talk. I don’t know if you were followed or whatnot. I ain’t trying to get hit by any stray bullets meant for your bighead.” He smirks.

Alvin laughs and pushes Binky in his arm while saying: “Man, you ain’t never going to change.”

Binky smirks. “Al, go ahead and finish telling me about Chip and Man-Man. Whoa, it just hit me, what kind of name is Garvin anyway?”

That dude was destined to be a sheep. That’s a wimpy name.” They both rise and walk toward his backyard.

Alvin says: “Agreed! Check this out, though, so Chip reconnected with Man-Man a few years ago. They’re pushing a huge load in Cali. They call themselves The Pushers. Chip mentioned that if I ever wanted a way back in the game, he would see to it that I got back in the right way. He mentioned that he would see to it that I was treated like royalty. I hit Chip up the same day that I stole Troy’s stuff. I told him what I had, and I mentioned I wanted to donate it to him as a gift.”

Binky pauses. “Are you insane? You gave that type of load away?”

Alvin shakes his head. “I know! Hear me out, though. I did it so that once I’m back in, I’ve some good connects.”

They fist bump to show that they agree. “So, I figured that would increase my chances of being treated like royalty because of my loyalty.”

Binky chuckles as he opens the wooden fence to his backyard. Alvin enters and Binky follows. Binky looks to his right and places his hands inside his robe. He points at Alvin.

“I see you, thug. I see you trying to rhyme on me right now or something? I don’t mind busting out into a freestyle on you. You know how we used to do it back in high school.”

Alvin laughs and drops his head as he rubs the bottom of his chin.

Binky taps him on his left shoulder and says: “Yeah, I remember! Freestyle Fridays during lunchtime was our thing. We all got together and watched Freestyle Friday on 106 and Park too.”

“Keeping it real though, I know if I double The Pushers’ earnings, I’ll be set. Like you mentioned earlier, a brother is kind of smart. You feel me?”

“I feel that. Now keep going with your story.”

“I have a plan that’s going to allow me to keep up with the newly released convicts. We both know they’ll have trouble finding jobs. So, check this out: I started this non-profit organization a few years back to help people find jobs.”

Binky holds his hands up. “But my dude, how does that work, since it’s hard for you to find a job yourself?”

Alvin winks his right eye and smirks. “Good question! My plan is to show that I’m a good citizen by helping others out, which will lead to me getting more job offers. I’ve received a lot of job offers because of my non-profit organization. However, I haven’t accepted any yet because my last turn-around-job offered me a permanent position. They also offered to send me to college so I could become a chemical engineer. BTI Chemical Plant was impressed by my natural prowess. They loved the things I was doing with my non-profit organization.”

Binky’s skeptical expression dissipates as Alvin articulates his vision.

“Once I started receiving a lot of job offers through my non-profit, that’s when I knew my idea would work. It’s a noble idea to help restore an ex-con’s persona. I didn’t realize how brilliant it was to imagine the possibility of organizations reaching out to me to hire the ex-cons that make up my organization. This is my plan on paper. The reality of the matter is that my ex-cons will work illegally for me.”

Binky raises his eyebrows. “How so?”

“Well, they’ll sell drugs while appearing to be motivational speakers. They’ll speak at prisons, high schools, Black Lives Matter events, and juvenile detention centers. I will be their agent and book their speaking gigs. I was sure to only pick men that speak well. This facade will help to validate the legitimacy of my non-profit.”

Binky gives Alvin another fist bump while smacking his lips and laughing. “I’m not going to even front—that’s a great idea.” He grins while scratching his head.

Alvin smiles too as he places his hands atop Binky’s shoulders. “I know!”

“So, did you go to college?” Binky asks.

“Of course. I graduated at the top of my class from Southern University A & M Agricultural College.”

“Man, get out of here!” Binky tosses his hands into the air. “You were really on the yard with all of those dime-pieces?”

Alvin rubs the top of his head. “That’s where I reconnected with Leah.”

Binky shakes his index finger. “Oh yeah, I remember her from high school. She was super fine.”

“Nah, you mean she still is fine. She’s the woman I want to marry. We were in a relationship, but things didn’t work out. I plan to win her back,” says Alvin.

“By the way, what’s the name of your non-profit?” Binky asks.

“Ah man, I named it, From Good Men to Great Men,” says Alvin.

“That’s what’s up. From Good Men to Great Men? Don’t you think that’s a little contradictory? If they’re former prisoners, then obviously they weren’t good men at first,” says Binky.

“Binky, you don’t believe that yourself. You’re out here slanging too. You just haven’t got caught. We both know that you have a good heart but sometimes as Black men, we gotta do what we gotta do.”

Binky frowns. “I’m going to stop you right there. You’ve always been the smarter one—but not when it comes to morals and values. I wouldn’t recommend for anyone to get involved with guns and drugs. It has become a lifestyle for me, and I really don’t like it, I feel trapped. Besides, I don’t think that Black men or men of any race have to choose this path. Nothing good comes out of living like this. I plan to get out of the game next year.”

“Well, you’re trying to get out and I’m trying to get in even deeper. And you ain’t fooling me, I know you like the money you’re making.” Alvin glances and points at the fancy double doors that led to the back entrance of Binky’s house. “Look at this fancy house that you have. You can’t get a house and whips like the ones you have working an average job.”

“Nah bro, I believe we can.” Binky points to his brain. “We have to set our minds on how to do it.”

“Man, you’re getting soft on me,” says Alvin.

“No, I’m getting wise. Look, just tell me what you need me to do. And Alvin, this is going to be the only time that I help you like this. I’m only willing to take a loss for you right now because I have enough money saved up to leave the game.”

Alvin steps closer to Binky and places his right hand atop his shoulder. “This won’t be a loss! What I’m going to do will give you a

major profit right away. The ex-prisoners that are in my non-profit organization, I was paying them with the small operation I was running on the side. But I'm officially ending that, right now."

Binky quickly glances at Alvin's hand on his shoulder. "What were you doing on the side?"

Alvin removes his hand. "I was selling a little weed here and there, but after I discovered Troy's stash, I decided to approach a few of my non-profit men with my proposition. A lot of them accepted my offer. I was able to convince them to work blocks' that weren't being covered."

Binky looks perplexed. "I thought you stole coke from Troy?"

"I did! But here's the situation. I gave C-Thang cocaine in exchange for a decent amount of weed—plus his word on a massive load in the future."

Binky grimaces. "Wait! So, you stole from your own brother based on a promise from a drug dealer?"

Alvin sighs. "Binky, now we both know that C-Thang's word is good. It was my only way to establish a relationship with Chip and The Pushers. Besides, Chip was impressed with my ideas, and he promised not to leave me hanging."

Binky scoffs. "How much do you need?"

"I need you to spot me fifty-thousand and a little coke so I can sell it myself. I need a way to continue to pay my men. I also need money to buy out the other dealer's products. After I buy their products, I'll resell it at half the price." Alvin places his hands in his pockets. "Chip owes me a lot of weed because I gave him Troy's coke. My plan will allow me to sell massive amounts of weed. I'm going to put a lot of

dealers out of business by taking their clients.” Alvin removes his hands from his pockets and grabs Binky’s hands and squeezes them. Binky looks at him like he’s crazy. “My plan will triple what I stole from Troy in three weeks.

I finally have the manpower and the connections to do it.” Binky’s interest is piqued.

“Bro, I need an advance from you. But you’ll have to wait until I can pay you back. And I promise, I will pay you back. But it’ll be about two months before I can,” says Alvin.

Binky shuffles his feet and rubs his chin. “Have you talked to Chip yet?”

“No, I haven’t. I’m going to do that right now. I want you to hear me talking to him, so you’ll know everything is legit. We both know that Chip is adventurous when it comes to new, especially bold ideas,” Alvin lies.

Binky grins and Alvin calls Chip.

Chip’s raspy voice echoes through the phone. “What’s up? How are you doing, Big Al?”

“Chip, I’m fine, man. Look, I want to take you up on your offer.”

“Cool! What do you have in mind?”

“A multimillion-dollar project.”

Chip sounds excited. “I’m all ears.”

Alvin informs Chip of his plan, the same plan he mentioned to Binky. Chip loves Alvin’s non-profit idea along with his idea of using

workers from his non-profit to administer The Pushers products, so he accepts Alvin's request while cautioning him.

“Look, I like what you're saying but remember, don't mess with The Capers. I can protect you against all of the other small fries out here, but we like to steer clear of The Capers. I think I might make a personal visit to Baton Rouge and let the locals know they'll have to work for you eventually.” Chip exhales. “And Alvin, I want my cut too. I'll wait until after you have your operation in full effect, though. I'm going to make a few phone calls right now to solidify your safety with some of my connections in Baton Rouge.”

Alvin politely interrupts: “C, I'm not trying to put this idea into motion in Baton Rouge. I'm thinking of a bigger market. My plan is to bring my idea to New Orleans too.” He glances at Binky, who's fully engaged.

“That's cool. I have connections in New Orleans. I like your ideas. Remember, you have to look out for yourself out here in these streets,” says Chip.

“Tell me about it,” says Alvin.

“I know! I'm sure there're some fools that'll probably want to smoke you. So again, a triple-heads up. The Capers are the only entity that we don't touch. They're as powerful as we are, so we respect them, and they respect us too. Make sure you stay out of their territory!”

“For sure!”

“You're a smart dude Alvin. If this goes well, and I'm sure that it will, Jim will probably want to hire you for a bigger workload.”

Alvin smiles. “Cool!”

“Let’s see how your plan pans out first. It’s very important for me to feel certain about everything. I don’t like risky things; I only back guarantees.”

Alvin smirks. “Thanks, man, I really appreciate you.”

“No problem, you hold it down over there,” says Chip.

Alvin hangs up and stares at Binky. Binky smiles and steps forward with a look of approval.

“Okay, you got yourself a deal. I trust you. I’ll go get your fifty-grand and a few keys of coke.”

“Thanks, Binky! Man, you’re a lifesaver.” Alvin glances at his wristwatch. “I only have two more hours before my meeting with Jim.”

Binky holds his left hand up. “Hold that thought. I’ll be right back.”

Binky brings out the package to him. “Here you go.”

“Thanks again, Binky.”

“No problem. At least you’re in Gonzales, so you aren’t that far away. It shouldn’t take you more than forty-five minutes to arrive in New Orleans. Ay, pull up his address on your GPS and check to see how far away the meetup spot is?”

Alvin puts Jim’s address into his phone.

“Good looking out. He’s an hour and fifteen minutes away, so I have about forty-five minutes to play with,” says Alvin.

“Do you need some heat?” Binky asks.

“Nah, I’m sure that’ll get me shot if they find a gun on me. I think

I'll be fine without one."

"Alright, you're on your own now. I've given you everything you need. By the way, I know you heard Chip when he said you don't want to mess with The Capers. We both know they hate Black folks. I don't understand how they're able to get away with all the racist stuff they do."

"I'll tell you how. They probably have some dirty cops on the inside. I'm confident they're paying several cops to assist them," says Alvin.

"The police department probably doesn't even look their way."

"True that! Man, I drove by a po-po earlier in a Capers' truck pushing one-hundred-and-twelve miles and the cop waved at me as I flew by. He couldn't see me because my tint is dark." Alvin carries his package to the truck. "Thanks again, bro. I really appreciate this."

"No problem, you know that you're my dude."

A few seconds later, Alvin jumps in the truck and backs out of Binky's driveway. I hope this goes as planned. I'm sure Jim wants payback for Joe.

Alvin tries to call Troy. Still no answer. He frowns. Something is off. Maybe Troy hasn't answered my calls because Jim is holding him captive or something? I know that he's going to use my brother as leverage, but why didn't he tell this to me? Man, Jim is really playing with my mind, but I know how to play better. He holds a small rectangular-shaped device in his hands and places a small chip inside his cellphone—right behind the phone's sim card. Jim doesn't have a clue who he's dealing with. I know that he's going to confiscate my phone. Then all I have to do is turn on my top-notch device here. I'm a freaking genius. He smiles. My phone will track Jim's moves and

voice calls. He glances at the device again. Jim can't scare me since I'm an eon ahead of his thinking.

Alvin drives up a ramp to merge onto the interstate. He mildly perspires around his forehead as he ponders whether or not he should've brought a gun with him. I probably should've grabbed some heat from Binky.

Chapter 8: The Enemy Within

An Hour After his Initial Meeting with Jim

After Alvin arrives at his house in Baton Rouge, his phone's screen buzzes, lighting up with Dionne's number. He answers the phone.

Dionne's voice conveys panic. "Alvin, why are men pulling up in black SUVs at your house? There's like four of them. Oh my God, they've surrounded the house. I'm scared. One of them is knocking on the door right now! He's demanding that I open the door! I'm afraid. What do I do?"

"It's okay Dionne. That's just Jim's men. The meeting went well. He mentioned to me that he was going to have men posted at my house until I paid him back." He exhales. "You and Travis won't be able to leave the house because they want to keep eyes on you all. But don't be afraid. Go ahead and open the door and let him in," says Alvin.

"Thank goodness," says Dionne.

I should drive to Lake Charles and kill everyone except Travis. I have enough money to skip town and disappear for good. I really want to end Dionne, but I can't do that because it'll hurt Travis. Since Jim already knows about Leah, I can't harm his men either.

"Alvin, are you there?" Dionne asks.

"Yeah," says Alvin.

Alvin looks at the bags under his eyes through the rearview mirror.

"I really need some rest."

“Me too,” says Dionne.

Alvin feels ambivalent about his disposition as he reflects on Travis’ feelings. I need to forgive her for Travis’ sake. Other than that, I would absolutely end her. He sighs.

“Look, forgive me for my words earlier. I’m sorry I threatened you. I’m sure you didn’t mean to kill my brother. I watched my dad beat my mom, so I can only imagine what it feels like to be beaten by a man that claims to love you. I don’t need to ask Travis about what happened anymore. Dionne, everything is going to be okay. I pulled it off. I got us out of the jaws of death.”

“Yes, you did. But until we are officially back in Baton Rouge, I’ll wait before I give you my final thank you. And we’ll need a new place.”

“In three weeks, you all can stay with me at my house in Baton Rouge. After some time has elapsed, I’ll help you look for a place of your own. I’ll pay for it since I know you don’t have a job. It’s the least I can do.” I’m not doing this for you, it’s really for my brother and nephew. I betrayed my own flesh and blood.

“Thank you, that’s so sweet of you. Alvin, I want to ask you something. How did Troy—”

Alvin intercedes. “Whoa! Hold on a quick second. Look, I’ll call you right back.”

Alvin hangs up and grabs his other cellphone out of Jim’s glove compartment that only Alvin knows about. He places a special device against his secret phone and puts it near Jim’s phone. This little device here will deactivate Jim’s bug in his phone while instantly transferring the contacts in this phone to my secret phone. Even the same number

will pop up when I call her back. I'll call her back on this phone in a second. He smiles. I'm always a step ahead of my competition.

Alvin returns her call and Dionne picks up where she left off. The device he activates also has a special feature that gives him a secure line, in case The Capers are listening in. No one can hear their conversation now.

Dionne asks: "How did Troy get you to agree to hold his drugs? I was thinking, and it doesn't make much sense for him to have taken his stash out of the house, then give it to you so that you could bury it." Alvin is shocked that Dionne is being inquisitive. He hesitates for a few seconds. He calculates a reply in order to answer her question without stumbling over his words.

"It's a long story, Sister-in-law," says Alvin.

"Why are you calling me, 'Sister-in-law'? You know Troy and I weren't married."

"I know, but he was going to propose to you this weekend. He had plans to get out of the game, and that's why he told me to take his stash and bury it at my house. He knew that his assigned Ground Watcher was a little sloppy. His Ground Watcher always fell asleep, giving Troy time to drive to New Orleans sometimes in the early afternoon to visit a few of my cousins for thirty minutes to an hour," says Alvin.

Dionne scoffs echoes through the phone.

Alvin finishes his thoughts. "Troy told me that his Ground Watcher rarely checked in on him."

She elevates her voice. "Troy risked being reprimanded to visit his cousins for thirty minutes to an hour?"

“Yep, we all are very close. I think that maybe, sometimes, Troy hit his Ground Watcher up and told him what he was trying to do. That’s how I was able to sneak in and take everything,” says Alvin.

“Oh, I didn’t know that. Now I see how you gained access to Troy’s stash. I see why Troy entrusted you with his stuff. But I still have a question that is lingering within my mind,” says Dionne.

Alvin rubs his lips. “What’s your question?”

“Why was only half of his stash buried?”

“Troy told me to invest half of it into some other things and I did that after I buried half of it.”

She exhales. “Hmm. How did you invest Troy’s other half?”

She’s asking too many questions now. “In order to protect you, I think that’s something I need to keep to myself. Put Travis on the phone.

I have to go soon!”

There is a hesitation on the other end of the line.

Alvin sighs. “Are you there? I really want to talk to my little man.” Dionne takes a deep breath. “Sure, I’m sorry. I’ll go get Travis, right now.” Alvin listens to her walk.

“Travis, here’s the phone; your Uncle Alvin wants to talk to you.”

Alvin hears Travis’ muted voice in the background as the phone is passed over.

“What’s up nephew? How are you?” Alvin asks.

“I’m feeling fine, Unc. I was concerned about you. How did everything go?” Travis asks.

Alvin smirks. “‘How did everything go’? How do you think everything went? You know that your uncle Al ran laps around those fools. I have an IQ of one-hundred-and-seventy-five. I was miles ahead of them before they knew they were falling into my trap.”

“Wow, Uncle Al, I didn’t know that your IQ is that high,” says Travis.

I need to go to the gas station real quick. Alvin starts the engine and exits the driveway. “Oh yeah, it is. Your daddy had a high IQ too. Travis, look, don’t think that just because people are dealers and gangsters, that they aren’t smart. Sometimes it’s other things in life that lead to people getting caught up out here in these streets. You know, your dad’s and I’s father was never around. It’s hard for any young man to find his way without his father.”

“I feel you, Uncle Al.”

“Travis, I need to ask you something and it’s important.”

“Okay, Unc.”

“Do you have Jermaine’s and Kevin’s numbers? I need to hit them up.”

“Yeah, I have their numbers. I played b-ball with them last week. I schooled them too.”

“Great. Text me their numbers,” says Alvin.

“Okay,” says Travis.

I probably should share some more knowledge with him.

“Travis, a man’s intelligence is unlimited, so it really can’t be measured. I just like playing around with numbers a lot, so don’t overly focus on an IQ score.” Alvin exhales. “I wanted to be an astronaut at one point.” “Really,” asks Travis.

“Yeah. I love to figure things out, but I got caught up in these streets. I had to spend a little time in jail when I was in high school. It’s hard getting things expunged off your record, especially when you’re Black. I don’t know if your mom or dad had the conversation about being Black with you?”

“Yeah, they had the Black-talk with me a while ago. They told me how to address a police officer, and they encouraged me not to get involved with drugs.” Travis sighs. “Well, my mom did. My dad was okay with me selling drugs. He even offered to get me started in the game.”

“For real, he did that?” Alvin asks.

“Yes.”

“Did he know about your writing dreams?”

Travis speaks lower than before. “No, I was afraid to tell him because I thought he would think it was soft.”

“Travis, always speak with confidence. And I don’t think it’s soft. I think it’s a great idea to be a writer. Did you know that your uncle Al has a college degree? And I read a lot. In fact, I think that people who read and write rule the world. Remember this: You can’t apply what you don’t understand, and you can’t understand what you don’t know.”

“Uncle Al, that was deep.”

Alvin grins. “What can I say, I’m a deep brother.”

Alvin says goodbye to Travis and hangs up. He steps out of the truck and walks inside RaceTrac to pay for gas. He starts to think about his plan to get Jermaine and Kevin to come and work for him. I'll keep it real with them. I probably should send them a group text message rather than calling them. He exits the gas station and pauses outside the entrance door. I'll send them a text right now.

It's Al! What's up y'all? I'm back in business. I have a major shipment coming in. I need some heavy pushers. You'll make fifteen grand a piece for this deal. It'll take two days to get your money. Let's meet up at my place at 4 p.m. See you then. I miss you fellas.

Alvin talks to himself as he walks back to the truck.

He leaves the station and drives to Popeyes to order a chicken sandwich before he heads back home. A few minutes later, Alvin pulls back into his driveway. To his surprise, he sees two people that he thought he would never see again standing there.

“Speaking of the devil.” Alvin turns the truck's engine off.

Chapter 19: A Web of Lies: Encrypted Intentions

November 2003

8:00 p.m.

Jermaine is at his house in Baton Rouge. He is awakened by a couple of loud knocks on his front door. He looks through his peephole and notices it's Detective Sue. He opens the door, and a tall, White man puts a gun to his chest. He recognizes the man as John, one of Jim's bodyguards. *And with John comes...* Jim walks in behind him.

Jermaine's son jumps up. "Don't hurt my daddy." Gary starts hitting John.

Jim slaps little Gary into an unconscious state. He instructs Sue to close Jermaine's front door.

Jermaine attempts to charge at Jim. John picks him up and slams him against the floor. With his adrenaline still rushing, Jermaine yells: "I will beat the crap out of you for knocking my son out."

Jim steps forward. "No, you won't."

Jermaine sighs. "Oh yeah?"

Jim kicks Gary in the stomach just as he regains consciousness.

John throws Jermaine on the couch. Sue steps forward. Little Gary is on the floor in a fetal position next to his father. "Give us an explanation for why your name keeps coming up with connections to this new gang called The Gamers. They're taking all of our members for a cheaper price. Why didn't you answer my phone calls from the other day? I've been coming to your house, but you've been nowhere

in sight for the past three days. Were you out of town? Perhaps in New York or something?" Sue asks.

Jermain lifts his eyebrows. "What are you talking about?"

She points to the table behind her. "You're the one with a New York Giant's ticket stubs laying on his table!"

Jermaine is stopped from replying by a blow to his head from Jim. "Who are The Gamers? Is their operation run by Alvin?" Jim asks.

I wish I'd said no to Alvin a few years back when he asked me to work for him. "Jim, no!" Jermaine glances at Sue. "I didn't receive your calls. I didn't go to New York. Those are tickets that my brother left here the other week. He wanted to show me proof that he went to New York to attend a Giant's game. I guess he forgot to take his stubs with him."

"You're lying," says Sue.

"Yeah, I think he is too. There's one way to find out. We can get Kevin on the phone right now," says John.

Jim looks at Jermaine and asks: "Where is your cellphone?"

"Okay, I don't want any trouble. My phone is in my room. I'll go get it," says Jermaine.

"No, you stay right where you are, boy," says Jim.

"Do you think that we are dumb or something? I'll go get your phone," says Sue.

Sue walks down Jermaine's hallway and enters his room. She yells: "Hey Jim, look what I found." Sue reenters the living room. In

her hand, she holds a gun Jermaine left on his bedside table. Sue dangles the pistol back and forth on her finger.

Jim grabs the pistol and walks toward Jermaine. Jim spits on his face. “So, you think I’m stupid? You wanted to go to the bedroom so that you could grab your pistol and then try to come out and shoot us? I should end you right now!”

Jermaine is startled.

“I’ll figure out another way to find out if Alvin is trying to double-cross me or not. What’s your phone’s password? And don’t play any more games with me,” says Jim.

In a hurry, Jermaine says: “It’s three-four-five-five.”

“Good! I’m glad that you made the right decision. I’m assuming you have him saved as ‘brother’ or ‘Kevin’ or something?”

“I have him saved as ‘Kevin’. He’s the only Kevin that’s in my phone,” says Jermaine.

Jim dials Kevin’s number.

Kevin doesn’t answer.

Jim hangs up, then he pulls Sue to the side. “Hey, Sue, I need to speak with you for a quick second in the kitchen.”

“Okay,” says Sue.

Jim and Sue walk into the kitchen. “I noticed when I called Kevin that he didn’t have a Baton Rouge or a New Orleans area code. I want you to look up where eight-three-two is located.”

She raises her eyebrows. “I’ll look it up now.”

Sue googles eight-three-two. “Whoa, so this is a Houston, Texas area code. Are you thinking what I’m thinking?”

“Yes, I am. I think that Kevin might know more about the crime that the police are trying to connect to The Capers. If Jermaine and Kevin had anything to do with it then I know that Alvin is involved for sure. If he is, then we need to find out what he has conjured up. Don’t inform Jermaine or hint that we know anything.”

“Okay.”

“We need to keep digging. We need to know what’s going on in New York,” says Jim.

“So, what do you suggest that we do if we detect that Kevin is living in Houston?” Sue asks.

“I don’t see how Alvin could’ve arranged this whole thing. I monitor the corners that he covers. I don’t think that he’s the one blocking my usual corners. I even inquired from some of my clients whether or not he privately approached them. I even offered the ones who weren’t buying from me a cheaper deal than my competitors, and they all refused to buy from me. They claimed they’re going clean now,” says Jim.

Sue sighs. “It’s possible that a lot of them are clean now. I really don’t know.”

“You think that over forty of our clients all of a sudden went cold turkey, and cleaned up their lives? Come on Sue, that’s nonsense. Aren’t you a detective? You know, I’m starting to question the team that I’m using to help me keep my operation afloat. I feel like you and John should have caught on to this before it got out of hand.” Jim looks at Sue. He scoffs and points toward the living room. “Is this not why I

pay you two very well? And you want me to spend more time with you? You can forget about that. And Shel—”

Jim almost slips up and mentions Shelby’s name.

“And what?” Sue asks.

“Nothing,” says Jim.

Sue says: “Give me a little more credit, Jim. John isn’t the one that’s making you feel good at night. I suggest that you stop talking to me like that. You should take your frustration out on someone else because I’m doing my job. You ever think that maybe your little secret news mole is the one that is double-crossing you? Maybe he leaked information to the police? I mean, a one-million-dollar reward is tempting. How ironic, the guy that you created is the same guy that’s creating turmoil for you.”

Jim scoffs and clenches his teeth together. “The whole purpose of the A-Wall character is to take the police’s attention off of me.”

Sue lifts her hands while raising her eyebrows as she says: “I’m just saying that maybe your little news mole connected the dots and leaked some information to smoke you out so that they could get you talking about A-Wall. Remember, he’s just a fictional character, right?” She smirks and Jim frowns. “Maybe your person wiretapped a conversation with you or something? Because the police and the feds aren’t really questioning whether or not A-Wall is a real person. Maybe the feds insinuated that they think that the whole thing is a hoax to distract you.” She steps forward and gently kisses Jim on the cheek. “This is why I wanted you to tell me who your mole is so that I could look into his background. I hope you know you can trust me way more than Miles and your stupid little news mole.”

Sue continues to ramble and express her frustration along with her suspicions. As she continues to be taciturn, Jim starts to reminisce on an encounter with his news mole...

...Two years ago, Sandy called Jim. "We need to meet today. I know that you've been trying to create a pseudo-profile to keep the police off your trail and I have some vital information that will help you to create a profile for the culprit. When are you available to meet today?" Sandy asked.

"Noon," said Jim.

"Where?" Sandy asked.

"You already know where," said Jim.

"Sounds good," Sandy replied.

Two hours later, Jim and Sandy met up at The Green Ranch Library in New Orleans. They discussed pertinent details involving A-Wall. Jim wondered why Sandy was shaking. He reasoned: *Just look at this fat piece of trash. He does this every time we meet.* Jim sighed. *Your sister has more balls than you. I can't believe that he's related to her.*

Jim looked annoyed. "So, what do you have?"

"I have a way for you to create your profile for A-Wall. Whenever you dispose of people, you can point the finger at someone that doesn't exist. The feds and the police will never catch on. However, you're going to need the cooperation of someone inside the police department," said Sandy.

"I already have a mole inside the police department," said Jim.

“I know, but you need someone who really knows what they’re doing. I think that you need someone else, who isn’t in the Sheraton Department, to really help your idea to be successful. You should really consider placing someone in The Seaside Police Department in New Orleans too,” said Sandy.

This better be good. “Why?” Jim asked.

“I guarantee you that no one will ever make the connection,” said Sandy.

Jim paused. *Why didn’t Sue think of this?*

Sandy smirked and said: “Let’s do this. Let’s create a profile from an officer that actually exists. Then, I’ll bring this news to the Lieutenant here in Baton Rouge. He will be interested in hearing my story.”

“And whom would that be?” Jim asked.

“I’m thinking Lieutenant Miles from the Sheraton Police Department in Baton Rouge,” said Sandy.

“And what’s your rationale behind that?”

Sandy looked like he was about to reply before Jim intervened.

Jim sighed. “Look, I like Baton Rouge as a location to help stage my idea because it keeps some distance between me and New Orleans. I don’t always like for things to be too close to home, especially for an idea like this,” said Jim.

“Baton Rouge it is.” Sandy exhaled. “I’ll paint the picture in a way that makes it seem like the police department isn’t doing its job. I’ll get my sister to set up the meeting with Miles,” said Sandy.

“Do you think that I’m stupid or something? You think that I would allow you to work with your sister so that you can expose my whole operation? She is my leverage on you,” said Jim.

“I know that Jim, but I’m really trying to help you get over the hump. If I bring her in on this, she’ll be able to do things that you and I can’t,” he said.

Jim smiled. *What an idiot. She’s on my side. If only you knew the truth, you wouldn’t be saying what you’re saying.*

“Jim, is everything okay? You blanked out on me,” said Sandy.

“Look, I’m not interested in getting your sister involved because that’s a conflict of interest. But I am interested in hearing your story on how you plan to twist my A-Wall idea into something tangible that’ll work?” Jim asked.

“I was thinking you could have A-Wall carve marks on his bullets. And whenever you or your men have to kill someone, the authorities will notice distinctive patterns. You can have A-Wall send out a manifesto. That way, he’ll appear to be a real person. In the manifesto, A-Wall will take credit for all the murders that you’ve actually committed,” said Sandy.

Jim smirked and nodded his head. *I like this.* “Hmm. Continue.”

“If you play this right, everything will be connected to A-Wall. You can even set it up so he’s a subset deviation from The Capers.” “Speak English,” said Jim.

“So, you can stage it where A-Wall is a disgruntled member of The Capers.”

Jim shook his head and stood up. “Uh, I dunno.”

He politely gestured for Jim to sit back down. “Just hear me out,” said Sandy.

Jim sat back down.

“You can tell them that A-Wall tried to join your gang, but you denied him. Then, out of frustration, he kills a few of your men and goes on a rampage where he only kills Black people. Uh—uh, and as you continue to execute your massacre, you can say that the real culprit is A-Wall, who was excommunicated from your gang.”

Jim grinned. “I like this.” He glanced at Sandy. “I’ll give this evidence to my mole that’s already inside of the department here in Baton Rouge.” Jim looked serious. “What do you want for all of this? And how do you plan to present this to Miles?”

Sandy said: “I don’t want anything besides your protection and your word that you won’t ever harm my sister. Like never—”

Jim slapped his hand down on the table. “You already know that I won’t harm your sister as long as you’re taking care of business for me.”

“I was just worried because I don’t want anything to happen to her,” said Sandy.

Jim twisted his neck out of agitation. “I’m the reason why you were promoted as a senior pundit. We both know that I’ve afforded you the opportunity to spruce up my crimes before you or anyone else reports them.” He exhaled. “Now tell me how you plan to present this to Miles.”

“I plan to go to his station and then—”

Jim intervened: “I don’t want you to meet with him at the news station because I don’t want your sister to see you there. I can’t risk

you ratting on me.” He leaned forward. “Remember, if you ever make that mistake, I’ll have to enforce my promises. If you really want to win my trust, then stop making me think you’re trying to leak information to your sister and the cops.”

Sandy cleared his throat. “Okay fair enough. I’ll present it to Miles this way instead: I’ll call the station and you can listen in. I’ll ask for Miles to drop by the news station, and I’ll tell him that we can’t meet at the precinct because it’s very likely that it has been compromised.”

Jim squinted his eyes. “Keep going.”

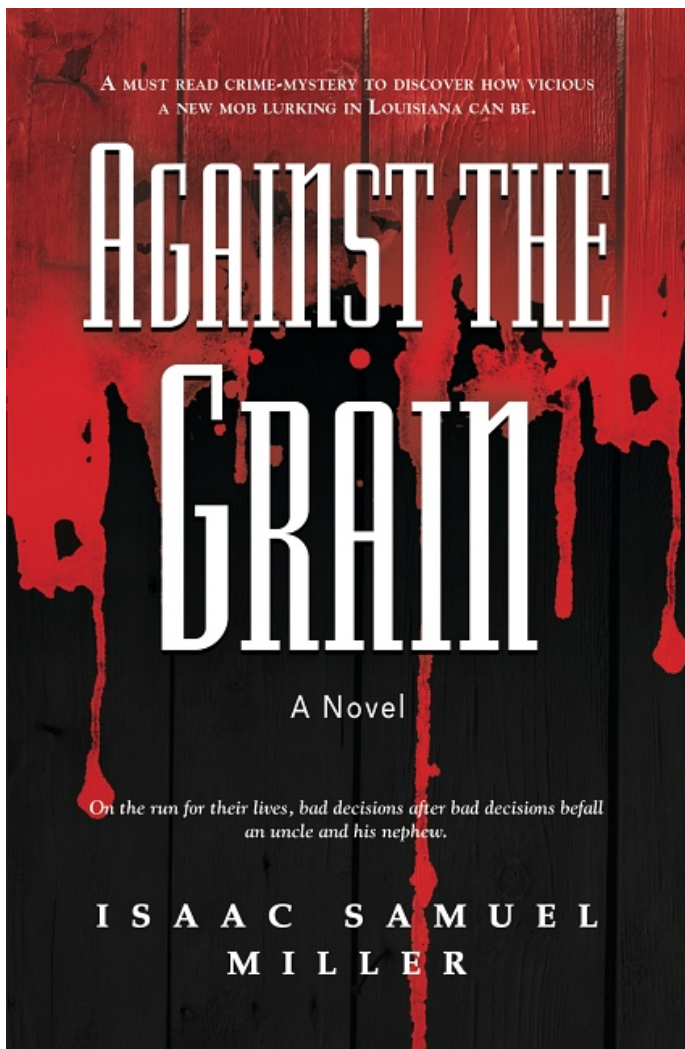
“When Miles arrives at the station, I’ll give him a picture of A-Wall and tell him I have the testimony of an anonymous witness to one of A-Wall’s crimes. That’ll put him on the trail of A-Wall’s fake profile.” Sandy laughed.

“Not amused,” said Jim.

Sandy immediately stopped laughing. “Okay, so after I present the case, I’ll tell Miles not to mention anything. I’ll present it in a way where Miles feels like he’s protecting me.”

“Sounds good,” replied Jim.

“And if you ever tell someone the truth, you can be certain that it’ll be the end of you and your darling sister,” said Jim.



There are some people you shouldn't mess with, especially if it puts your life in danger. The Capers are not to be toyed with, something Travis and Alvin regrettably begin to appreciate—but maybe it's a little too late?

Against the Grain

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