

Anitbeet Productions Presents:

A novel by Yani

A Thug's

Redemption 2

Jamal's Return

On an unusually warm day in early November of 2011, Manny was hanging on the corner of 24th and Oxford Street with his older brother Kiree and their best friend D-Ball. Manny had just turned 26 and was making plans to have a big birthday party at Luxe Lounge in the Old City section of Philadelphia. Times had been good for Manny and business had been booming for both he and his brother. They had become large over the years in the hustling game and were making more money than they could have ever imagined. Manny had promised his girlfriend Keisha of ten years that he would stop hustling for the sake of their son Kamir, but jobs were scarce and there was no way he was going to see his family go without.

The sun was shining and a warm breeze blew liter and leaves around that had fallen from the trees. Manny unzipped his hooded sweat-shirt to invite the breeze in to cool off a bit, not anticipating it to be such a warm day. He looked at his watch to see what time it was as he had promised Keisha

earlier that he would pick her up from work and they would all go out to dinner. “It’s nice as shit out here today,” he said to his older brother as he leaned into the wall of the corner Papi store.

“Yeah, I don’t trust weather like this. Whenever the sun comes out, niggas get stupid. I hope I don’t have to fuck anybody up today.” D-Ball said as he peered up the street.

“Nah, everything has been calm since we made that truce with Samir. These Young Heads don’t wanna go to war with us let alone Sa.” Kiree said in response.

“I guess,” Manny replied. “But you know some Young Head that just scored his first big pay and seen one too many *Paid in Full* type movies is going to start feeling himself.”

Kiree chuckled. “*Paid in Full*,” he mocked. “You’re funny as shit for that one. How’s my Lil’ Man doing? I ain’t seen my nephew in over a month. Tell Keisha to make time to stop by.”

“I will. She’s just been so busy with the gig at Prudential and with my son. But we’ll come through this weekend.” Manny replied.

“One thing I can say about Keisha; that girl is a straight rider. She’s been down with you since she was a young buck in the 9th grade. I never thought y’all would’ve lasted this long. You need to stop bull shitting and marry that

girl. You know that's what mommy wants." Kiree said to his younger brother.

"Oh trust me, I plan on it. I'm just waiting for the right moment. Trying to put some plans into motion first, but I'ma put a ring on her finger real soon," Manny replied. He looked at a car that passed by and began to feel uneasy. He could have sworn that he had just seen the same car ride past them two other times.

"Yeah, ya'll better. I got some toys for Lil' Man, too." Kiree replied.

"Oh that's what's up. Aye yo, bro; that dark green Bonneville that just passed by, I could've sworn that it rode through here a couple of times before already," Manny said as he looked down the street.

Kiree thought for a moment. "Nah, it's so many niggas around here riding in Bonnies. That's like the North Philly car; that and Crown Vics and Lesabres. Sometimes you're too paranoid."

D-Ball shook his head. "Nah, I peeped that shit, too. They came through three times."

"Yeah, paranoid my ass," Manny replied. "Fuck that, I'd rather be a moving target than a sitting duck, you feel me? I told Keisha I'd bring her some snacks. Let me grab them real quick and then we're out."

"I know that's the fuck right," D-Ball replied.

Manny went into the Papi store and grabbed the snacks that his girlfriend asked for. He stopped at the doorway to look at the cover of the Daily News and then walked out of the store when it happened. The same Bonneville sped around the corner and two guys jumped out opening fire without hesitation. D-Ball dove behind a car while Kiree took two to the chest and one to the stomach. Manny reached for his gun but was too slow. He took a shot in his shoulder and scrambled back into the store.

“MANNY!!” Kiree screamed out as blood poured from his mouth.

D-Ball peaked from behind the car that was shielding him and fired three shots at the gun men. He missed and cursed himself. He could see Kiree crumpled on the ground in a fetal position.

Manny pulled his gun and fired shots out of the store. D-Ball wasn't the target; the hit was for Manny and Kiree. Samir wanted them taken out as soon as possible, so the gunmen moved towards the store not wanting to be distracted.

“MANNY!!” Kiree managed to squeal again.

“KIREE!! KIREE! Hold on baby!” Manny called back to his brother. He scooted back so he could see who came into the store before they saw him.

D-Ball was almost in a panic. He knew if he didn't move fast, both of his friends would be killed. He pulled his back up pistol from his pants and tapped them together.

"Fuck this," he growled. He wasn't going out like a nut and swore he wasn't going alone either. He jumped up and fired both guns at the gunmen. One turned to fire back and took a shot to the head. The other gunman ran into the store in part to hide and in part to finish off Manny. They saw each other at the same time. Manny fired his gun just as the gunman fired his. He caught two shots to his chest but got a lucky shot off that hit his target in the neck. D-Ball ran into the store and shot the gunman in the head, finishing him off. He then ran over to Manny.

"Manny, are you good?" D-Ball asked as he knelt beside him trembling. He could hear him taking shallow breaths. He cursed and looked around. He figured the owners were hiding in the back and had already called 9-11. The police could be there any minute and he didn't want to get caught. "I'm sorry; Manny...I'm so sorry. I gotta go. Just hold on, homie. I swear I'ma find out who's responsible for this shit." D-Ball ran from the store, jumped into his car and sped off just as the sounds of sirens were drawing near.

Detective Davidson stopped his car away from the scene. He was used to the scenery. Almost every other day, some poor, young, black male was being gunned down on the streets of North Philly. It was becoming a pattern and he had suspected a turf war was erupting. He lifted the caution tape and ducked underneath so he could begin his investigation. Two bodies lay outside covered with a white sheet. Davidson walked over to the one closest to the Bonneville.

“Who’s the victim?” he asked a uniform cop that was standing nearby.

“I dunno. He didn’t have any ID on him. But judging by the ski-mask that’s on his face, I’m assuming he was the aggressor.”

“Or an extra for a Batman movie,” Davidson joked to lighten the mood. He stepped over the body and made his way to the second body by the side wall of the corner store. He pulled the sheet back and his heart sank into his stomach.

“This guy had ID on him, uhh Kiree...” The officer started to say.

“...Stephens. Yeah...I know him. I grew up with him and his younger brother...”

The uniform interrupted him. “Emmanuel Stephens?”

Davidson looked up at him. “Yeah, why?”

“Well we found him in the store. It looks like he took two GSW’s to the chest and one to the shoulder. We found a gun next to him and a fourth body not too far from him also wearing a ski mask. He appears to have a fatal GSW to the head and one to the neck. We’re waiting for ballistics to run some information to us. Judging by the angle of the head shot, I’m betting there’s another shooter missing from the action,” the uniformed officer concluded.

Davidson stood straight up. “You tell ballistics to put a rush on those results. I want them in my hands now. No, not now, but right damn it now. We have four dead victims and a missing gunman.”

“No sir, three dead victims, one in critical; Emmanuel was rushed to Temple University Hospital listed in critical condition. There’s no other info on him, yet,” the officer corrected.

Davidson shook his head. “Un-fucking-believable. Manny, you better damnit make it. You have a son, a girlfriend. I can’t even imagine how to break this news to their mother. Has the mother been notified?”

“Not that I am aware of, sir. Would you like for me to send a couple of guys over to reach out to her?”

“No...I’ll handle it.” Davidson looked around. He had been keeping record of the recent shootings in the area and noticed a pattern with the way the shootings occurred,

the times, and the way all of the victims were tied to each other. This was definitely more than random gun violence in North Philly. This was a drug war. One thing he concluded after going over ballistic reports to recent shootings is they all had one thing in common; the soldiers fighting this drug war were armed with weapons only cops were supposed to have. He had suspected for a while that there were dirty cops on the force. He had seen something similar years ago when he was a rookie.

“I’m taking it that none of these beautiful people out here saw what happened?” Davidson said sarcastically.

“You got it. Didn’t see shit, don’t know shit. And what’s worse is the damn store didn’t have tapes in the damn surveillance cameras.”

Davidson closed his eyes and chuckled angrily. “Who the fuck has a corner store across the street from the got damn projects in the heart of the hood and don’t put tapes in the got damn surveillance cameras? Only at the Papi store. Jesus H. Christ!” He kicked a trashcan over in anger drawing attention from other cops. “You call the lab and tell them I want those results now!” he growled.

“Yes sir,” the uniform cop stuttered as he moved away to do as he was told.

Davidson stood for a moment looking around. Kiree had been a good friend of his. He had warned him over the years that the street life only had a back door and a front

door: one leading to the grave or the other leading to a jail cell. He would've rather seen him judged by twelve and not carried by six. He prayed that his younger brother wouldn't be joining him. Something had to give and soon.

Davidson suddenly had a thought. He walked back to his car and grabbed his phone. "Yeah, Wilmington Police Department, this is Detective Keith Davidson from the 22nd District here in Philadelphia. I need to get in touch with one of your detectives by the name of Jamal Williams..."

Keisha stood in the lobby of Prudential Bank in the Center City section of Philadelphia with one of her co-workers. She was new at the job, only working there for five months after graduating from West Chester University and felt on top of the world. She was still with the love of her life, Manny. They had a four year old son together and an awesome apartment in the Jenkintown section of Philadelphia. Everything was going smoothly and she couldn't be happier. She was showing pictures of her son to her co-worker, laughing and joking when she happened to look at the clock and saw that it was almost 5:30PM.

“Are you sure your boyfriend isn't going to mind giving me a ride? I don't want to put y'all out the way,” her co-worker asked her.

“Oh no, it's cool. Manny isn't like that. He would rather give you a ride home and make sure that you got there safely than have you get on a bus or train and something happens to you,” Keisha replied as she tucked the photos inside of her black leather Tory Burch clutch handbag that Manny recently purchased for her. She grabbed her phone to call Manny. “He's a little late. Normally he's on time or would call me if he's going to be late.” She noticed that her

phone was off and chuckled. “I was about to have a whole attitude that he didn’t call me and my silly ass forgot to turn my phone on when I left my desk.” The two girls laughed together.

“So, how long have you two been together?” her co-worker asked her.

“We’ve been together since September 2001,” Keisha replied as she waited for her new iPhone to load.

“Wow girl!! That’s a long time. What’s your secret because I’m lucky if I can keep a man for 6 months,” they laughed together.

“Love and trust; that’s really all I can tell you. I love that man with all of my heart. He’s done some things that I don’t really agree with, but I understand the method to his madness. But he’s always been good to me. When I got pregnant with our son, he made sure I still finished school and got my degree. I don’t know what I would do without him,” Keisha said quietly. After her phone loaded up, she saw she had multiple text messages and voicemails. Instead of reading them, she called Manny’s phone. It rang until it went to voicemail.

“Hey babe, where are you? I’m in the lobby of my job waiting for you. Did we make other plans and I forgot? Call me when you get this. I’m going to walk over to the Juicy Couture shop and look around. I love you...” Keisha disconnected the call and looked at her phone.

“Is everything okay?” Keisha’s co-worker asked.

“Yeah...” Keisha replied quietly. “This isn’t like him at all.” She began scanning her text messages to see who they were from. She saw that she had five from her best friend Angela saying in all caps to call her ASAP. Just as she was about to call her to see what the problem was, Angela was calling her.

“Hey girl, what’s up?” Keisha answered.

“Why the fuck weren’t you answering your phone? Didn’t you hear my voicemails???” Angela shrieked into the phone.

“Why are you yelling and cursing? My phone was off at my desk. I forgot to turn it back on. What the hell are you so hype for?”

“THEY KILLED KIREE!!!” Angela yelled in tears.

“What?!” Keisha replied feeling weak. Her heart was pounding in her chest. “What? What do you mean? When?!”

“Not even an hour ago! Manny’s in the hospital, too! They don’t know if he’s going to make it. They said he got hit like four times!” Angela said, hysterically.

“Oh my God!” Keisha said instantly in tears. She fell to the floor crying. Her co-worker crouched next to her to console her.

“What’s wrong? What happened?” she asked Keisha.

“They shot my boyfriend and killed his brother!” Keisha screamed.

“Oh my God!” she snatched the phone from Keisha. “Hi, this is Liz, Keisha’s co-worker. What hospital is he in? I’ll get her there as soon as I can...Temple University Hospital? Okay, we’re on our way.” She disconnected the call and flagged down the security guard who was already making his way to them, noticing that something was wrong.

“It’s going to be okay, Keisha. Just hang in there,” Liz said trying to help Keisha get a hold of herself. Keisha wasn’t hearing her. She wasn’t hearing anything. How could her world be so perfect and then shatter in a matter of seconds?

“Is everything alright?” the security guard asked.

“I need a cab, now! She just found out her son’s father was shot and his brother was killed.” Liz explained as she helped Keisha stand up.

The security guard ran to the door and flagged down a cab that was coming around the corner. He helped Liz get Keisha into the car and instructed the driver where to go.

On the way there, Keisha’s phone was going off back to back with phone calls and text messages from everyone. She was losing her mind as she thought her worst nightmare was becoming a harsh reality. It didn’t seem like the cab was moving fast enough.

“Can’t you drive any faster man, come on!!” Keisha pleaded in tears.

“I’m driving as fast as I can, considering this is rush hour,” the cab driver responded nervously.

“Drive faster, jump lights, just get me to Temple Hospital, now!”

Liz threw her arm around Keisha and pulled her close. “I’m sorry sir, can you just please step on it?”

When they arrived, Liz paid the driver and Keisha bolted through the doors. A security guard grabbed her.

“M’am, m’am, slow down. What can I do for you?” he asked her.

“My boyfriend uh, Emmanuel Stephens; he was brought here an hour ago. He was shot. I need to see him,” Keisha said as she trembled. Angela ran over to Keisha and threw her arms around her. They cried together.

The security guard ushered them over to a nurse’s station. “Do we have an Emmanuel Stephens here?”

The nurse looked on her computer screen. “Yes, he’s in surgery.”

“Is he okay?” Keisha asked through tear drenched eyes.

“I can’t say m’am. You’ll have to talk with the doctors. One of his friends and a little boy just went up. They are on the 12th floor in the waiting room,” the nurse told her.

“Your brother is here. I called him when I finally got a hold of you,” Angela said as she wiped Keisha’s face.

“Maurice is here?” Keisha asked confused. She hadn’t seen Maurice in over a year. They had a nasty falling out over his and Deisha’s break up.

“Yeah, hurry up,” Angela told her. She grabbed Keisha’s arm and they ran over to the elevator with Liz in tow.

“What the hell happened? Who did this, Angie?” Keisha asked as she wiped her eyes.

Angela looked at Liz and then looked at Keisha to get the okay to speak. Keisha nodded her head. “I don’t know. Moe told me it sounded like fucking Afghanistan out there. The two dudes that did it are dead though. Somebody else was with Manny and Kiree but he didn’t say who.”

“D-Ball...” Keisha mumbled.

“Yup, I was thinking the same thing. You know those three been thick as thieves since way back when and D-Ball always had their back,” Angela agreed.

“Then why the fuck did he leave them there, huh? If he’s supposed to be their best fucking friend how could he just let them get hit liked that?!” Keisha replied furiously.

“That’s not what happened. From what Moe told me, Manny would be dead if it wasn’t for D-Ball. Well...he didn’t say D-Ball was there but we all know he was.”

They arrived to their floor and Keisha hurried down the hallway.

“Mommy!” she heard her son exclaim. He was sitting on Maurice’s lap. He squirmed off and ran over to her cheerfully, oblivious to what was going on. Keisha scooped him up in her arms and held him tightly. She covered him with kisses and then put him down.

“Maurice...” Keisha said in tears as her brother wrapped his arms around her. They didn’t need to say anything. They had been through this before when Dominique was killed. This time was much more tragic.

“I’m so sorry, Keesh. I came here as soon as I got the call,” Maurice told her.

“Thank you,” Keisha replied as she let him go. She looked around. “Where’s Ms. Becky?”

Maurice hesitated. “Kiree was killed. She didn’t take the news too well and had a heart attack.”

Keisha covered her mouth. “Oh my God!” she squealed and burst into tears. “This shit is fucking wrong on too many levels. Where is Manny, now?”

“He’s still in surgery. From what I was told he got hit twice in the chest, but I don’t know what’s good with him.”

“I need you to do me a favor...two actually. Take my son out of here. If something happens to his father, I don’t want him to see me crying,” Keisha requested.

“You’re sure? I understand why you’re asking but you shouldn’t be here by yourself,” Maurice replied.

“I’ll be okay. I have Liz and Angie with me and I’m sure more of Kiree and Manny’s family will be here, soon. But I don’t want him to know what’s going on.”

“Okay. I got you. What’s the other favor?”

Keisha leaned over and whispered in Maurice’s ear. “Call Jamal and tell him to find D-Ball and find his ass now.”

“Why?” Maurice asked in a low tone.

Keisha knelt in front of her son, Kamir. “Kay-baby, I want you to sit with Auntie Angie while I talk to your Uncle Mar, okay?”

“Okay mommy,” Kamir replied. Angela took his hand and led him over to the vending machine to buy him a bag of chips and a juice.

Keisha grabbed Maurice by the hand and pulled him over to a corner where they could talk in private.

“What does Jamal have to do with anything and why do you need him to find D-Ball?” Maurice asked.

“Isn’t Jamal a cop now?” Keisha asked.

“Yeah but he would be way out of jurisdiction. He’s not with the Philadelphia Police Department. He’s out Delaware.”

“I don’t care. Kiree was one of his best friends. I’m sure there’s something he can do. I know it is.” The anger was present in Keisha’s face.

“Keesh, is there something you’re not telling me?”

“Manny and Kiree just made a truce with Samir supposedly. I heard Manny tell Kiree that he didn’t trust it but I didn’t hear him say why. But he kept stressing that he had a feeling Samir was trying to get them to let their guard down. Now Kiree is dead and Manny is fighting for his life. It doesn’t take a fucking genius to see who’s behind this,” Keisha seethed through clenched teeth.

“Wait a minute hold up, Manny was still hustling even after y’all had Kamir? What the fuck was he thinking knowing how fucked up Samir is? You and Kamir could’ve been in danger!” Maurice replied angrily.

“Maurice, please don’t start. We can argue that shit later,” Keisha said as she shook her head.

“Fine, whatever. I still don’t get what D-Ball has to do with this?”

“Both of the guys that shot Kiree and Manny were killed too,” Keisha told her brother.

“You think D-Ball was there?” Maurice asked.

“You tell me when’s the last time you saw Kiree and Manny and D-Ball wasn’t around. I’m positive he was with them and was the one who killed the bastards that killed Kiree and shot Manny.”

Maurice rubbed his hands across his face not liking the way this was sounding. “Okay, let’s say that your theory is right, what does Jamal have to do with anything?”

“If the PPD finds out D-Ball was the one who killed those two guys, they are going to lock him up regardless if it was self-defense. Maybe Jamal can help him.”

“Nah, D-Ball won’t take help from Jamal let alone talk to him. Regardless of the fact that they were close friends, Jamal is a cop now. D-Ball ain’t talking to him. But there’s another problem. If you figured out D-Ball is always with Kiree and Manny and more than likely killed the guys that killed Kiree, Samir more than likely figured it out, too. They’re going to be coming after D-Ball.”

Keisha looked up at Maurice. “Shit...”

He could see her face as clear as day; her pretty light brown skin, her long dark hair and beautiful smile. She was radiant and as real as ever. She was standing in front of a mirror combing her hair and smiled at him. She then came over to the bed and playfully jumped in next to him. He could smell the vanilla and honey suckle scented body wash on her skin and feel her hand as she brushed it against his cheek. He could feel her cool breath as she leaned close to him to kiss him before saying, “I love you, Jamal.”

“I love you too, Tammy...” He opened his eyes and like all of the dreams before, she was gone.

Jamal jumped up from his afternoon nap.

“Tammy...?” he mumbled. He hadn’t had a dream like that in over eight years. Why now? He closed his eyes as his heart began to ache. Though it had been more than nine years since the murder of Tamera and their daughter, he still missed her. He missed the life they were supposed to have but was robbed of. He missed what should’ve been but never was. He took a deep breath and swung his legs over the edge of the bed.

Life was different for him now. He made a career for himself on the right side of the law as a detective for the Wilmington Delaware Police. Outside of his brother, mother and best friend Maurice, he had pretty much severed ties with his past. He even managed to start a new relationship with a teacher from Thomas Edison Charter School, which was going pretty well for him. But Jamal knew from past experiences that when everything was going good, something was going to go wrong.

He noticed that the light on his cell phone was flashing. He checked it to see who it could be. He saw a few missed calls were from Maurice along with multiple missed calls from his Lieutenant from the station. He put his phone on speaker and let the messages play:

“Yo Jamal, this is Maurice. Call me when you get this. It’s important. Peace.”

“That was kinda vague homie,” Jamal mumbled as he brushed his teeth.

“Hey Jamal, this is Sheila. I received an urgent request from a Detective Keith Davidson from the Philadelphia Police Department wanting to speak with you. He didn’t say what it was about, but he claims it was important. Stop by my office when you come in.”

“Who the hell is Keith Davidson?” Jamal mused. The name sounded sort of familiar but he wasn’t sure. He

definitely didn't like the idea of a Philly Detective seeking him out.

“Yo Jamal, I really need you to hit me up. You know I don't like putting things on voicemail. It's important homie. Hit me up.”

Jamal looked at the phone. He didn't like the tone in Maurice's voice. He was starting to get the feeling that all was not kosher in his old neighborhood.

“Look Jamal I was hoping to get you on the phone but I know sometimes you turn anti-social and don't answer. Kiree was killed and Manny got hit, too. Get at me when you get this message.”

Jamal's heart sank into his stomach. Not his homie Kiree Stephens! They had been best friends since they were two nappy-head nuccas running through the neighborhood, flipping on old mattresses and playing basketball with an old crate nailed to a pole posing as a basketball hoop. They went back more than 20 years. Not only was Kiree dead but Manny was caught, too? Something wasn't right.

“Yo Jamal, call me man. Keisha needs a favor. It would be even better if you could make it to Philly, ASAP. This ain't a conversation for the phone if you know what I mean...”

Jamal showered and got dressed. He was grabbing his phone and car keys when a call came through.

“Yes Lieutenant?” Jamal answered as he headed out of the door.

“Jamal, I’ve been getting calls from a Keith Davidson requesting to speak with you. He’s not saying what it’s about and I’m not too particular about Philly Cops seeking out my Detectives. Do you know what this is about?”

Jamal hesitated. “I haven’t the slightest clue,” he said in a low tone.

“Yeah well call this guy back at your earliest convenience and nip whatever this is in the bud, okay?” she gave Jamal the phone number and Jamal stored it in his phone.

“Alright Lou, I’m on my way in.” Jamal disconnected the call and put his blue tooth in his ear. He still couldn’t get over the fact that Kiree was dead and his brother was fighting for his life. Who the hell was the Detective that wanted to speak to him so badly? And why was Keisha asking for a favor? Something definitely was not right. He called Maurice.

“It’s about time nigga, I thought maybe you cut me off too,” Maurice answered without saying hello.

“What the hell is going on down there?” Jamal asked.

“Man, this shit is crazy. Kiree got murked, Manny is fighting for his life, Keisha is going out of her mind,” Maurice replied.

“Yeah man, I got your messages. So what’s up?”

“How soon can you get to Philly?”

Jamal took a deep breath. “Man...you know I don’t come through there no more.”

“Yeah I know and I wouldn’t ask you if it wasn’t important.”

“Does this have to do with the favor Keisha is asking?” Jamal asked as he pulled out of the parking lot to his apartment complex.

“Yeah,” Maurice hesitated.

“Mar, what aren’t you telling me?”

Maurice whispered. “Look, this really isn’t a conversation for the phone, you know what I mean? All I’m say is Keisha is positive that Samir had something to do with having Kiree taken out.”

“Then she needs to keep her mouth closed because history shows Samir is not bias when it comes to taking out women.”

“Don’t you think I know that? Look can you get to Philly tonight?” Maurice asked.

“I have to work tonight,” Jamal replied.

“Damn... well look if you can get to Philly soon, let me know. It’s more but I can’t talk on the phone. I’m in the hospital and there are security guards nearby.”

“I’ll see what I can do. I’m about to head in. I’m hit you back. Give my condolences to Keisha and Ms. Becky,”

Maurice hesitated again. “We just got word that Ms. Becky passed away. After they told her what happened to Kiree and Manny, she had a heart attack. She passed like an hour ago.”

Jamal let out a loud sigh and shook his head. “Damn... Ms. Becky used to baby-sit me and Shawn when we were kids. I’ma talk to my Lieutenant. I’ll tell her I had a death in the family and I’ll be there in about an hour. What hospital are y’all in?”

“You know it’s always the same one.”

“Temple...” they said at the same time.

“Alright, I’ll be there.” Jamal disconnected the call as he pulled into the parking lot of the station. He went inside and made his way over to his desk.

“Williams, in my office now,” the Lieutenant called down to Jamal.

Jamal sat his things on his desk and made his way over to her office.

“Close the door and have a seat,” she said as she took her glasses off and leaned on her desk.

Lieutenant Armstrong was a short Italian woman with striking features; long black curly hair that she mostly kept either in a ponytail or in a bun. She wore eye glasses that she sometimes tilted off of her nose as she looked over the rim of them at whomever she was speaking to. She was a woman

who commanded respect by her presence alone and never took bull-shit from anyone.

“How are you, Lou?” Jamal asked with a sly grin. He knew she hated when he called her that.

“Detective Davidson called again. He wanted to inform you that your Aunt Rebecca Stephens passed away from a heart attack. Apparently, her son Kiree Stephens was killed in a shooting and his Emmanuel is fighting for his life. He wanted to know how soon you could make it to Philly.”

Jamal’s face was blank. Though Ms. Becky was close to him as a kid growing up, she wasn’t his aunt and Kiree and Manny weren’t his cousins. He was curious as to why the Detective would lie to get him to come to Philly. He didn’t like the sound of this.

Jamal cleared his throat. “I um...I’m not sure. I’m on duty tonight and I have some paper work to finish up.”

“Take some time off and go be with your family,” the Lieutenant suggested. “That’s got to be difficult to deal with.”

“I had just gotten the news before I got here. I figured I would go tomorrow before work.”

“No, go be with your family tonight. You rarely ever take any time off. One thing I admire about you is that you’re very dedicated. So take this week and go be with your family. Make sure everything and everybody is okay. That’s an order.”

Jamal sat quietly before he made his way to the door. “Thanks Lou,” he said quietly with his back turned to her. He left the precinct and went to sit in his car. He looked in his phone at Davidson’s number for a moment before finally pressing the call button. His heart pounded in his chest while he patiently awaited an answer.

“Davidson,” a voice responded on the other end of the line.

“This is Detective Jamal Williams returning your phone call. You told my Lieutenant that my aunt and cousin passed away. Ms. Becky wasn’t my aunt and Kiree wasn’t my cousin. Who are you and what do you want?” Jamal asked suspiciously.

“I need you in Philly to disgust something in regards to a case that I’m working on,” Davidson replied, happy to have finally gotten a hold of Jamal.

“And I’m sure you know I wouldn’t be able to help you with any case because that district is out of my jurisdiction.”

“Trust me; you can help more than you think. I just want a fresh perspective from someone who is from the area, who’s been in the streets and knows the people.” Davidson paused hoping that Jamal was buying what he was selling.

Jamal was still suspicious. But curiosity was nagging him. He knew it was more to it than what the cop was saying. “I’ll call when I get to Philly.” He disconnected the call

before Davidson could respond. Jamal leaned back on the head rest of his car seat thinking. He was getting a nagging feeling in the pit of his stomach. Against his better judgment, he started his car and made his way back to Philly.

Samir stood in his office leaning on his cherry wood desk. He held a handful of darts and threw one after another as he thought to himself. All he needed was for Manny and Kiree to be out of the way and he could claim Blumberg Projects along with the surrounding blocks. He was strong arming the guys in that area with no mercy. Either you worked for him or you got worked over. There was no room for negotiation. His phone went off.

“Yo!” Samir answered on his blue tooth as he threw another dart, aiming for the bullseye.

“Sa we got a problem yo,” the man on the other end of the phone replied.

“A problem like what, Chris? Why are you calling me? Where are Mark and Rob?”

“They’re dead, man. They got cancelled.”

Samir slammed the darts onto his desk. “Fuck you mean they got cancelled? Are you telling me their punk asses couldn’t take out two lousy hits?” Samir was furious.

“They cancelled Kiree,” Chris replied nervously.

“What about Manny?” Samir asked.

“I heard he was in Temple, critical.”

“So who the fuck took them out? Was somebody else out there with them?”

“I think so.”

“You find out who and you find out now!” Samir yelled into the phone. With Manny alive and another gunman on the loose, retaliation would be soon to follow if he didn’t act fast.

“It doesn’t take a genius to know who else was with them, Sa. We think it was D-Ball,” Chris replied.

“You find that punk bitch and rock his ass to sleep A-fucking SAP,” Samir growled.

“We’re already on it. I was with one of my guys up at the hospital. I saw Manny’s girl there talking to her brother. I heard him make a phone call,” Chris trailed off.

“To who?” Samir asked.

“To Jamal, I think.”

Samir laughed and threw another dart. “That pussy ass Toy Cop can’t do shit. He ain’t been right since his girl got murked. He’s a non fucking factor. Keep an eye on Keisha and Maurice. And when you find D-Ball’s ass, bring him to me. I’ve been wanting to get him the fuck outta here for a long time. His time is up.” He disconnected the call. Samir began to wonder why Maurice reached out to Jamal. What could he possibly do? He dismissed his thoughts and figured just as he said to his minion; Jamal is a non-factor. But something about Jamal’s presence in Philly bothered

him. He thought again that maybe he shouldn't dismiss his return to Philly.

Keisha was sitting in Manny's hospital room listening to the doctors as they explained his injuries. Luckily no serious damage was done and Manny was expected to make a slow recovery. The doctors explained if the bullets had been two inches closer to the left, it would have taken out his heart and Manny would have been a goner. Keisha put her hands to her face and wept, partly in relief and partly in sorrow because Manny's brother and mother had been lost due to the senseless violence. She thanked sweet Jesus that he spared her son's father and the love of her life. Changes were going to be made once Manny recuperated. There was no way she could handle this type of devastation again. Both she and the doctors agreed that it would be best if the news of his mother's death were kept from him until he was stronger. They left Keisha in the room with him. She pulled a chair over to Manny's bed side and sat next to him so she could hold his hand. She closed her eyes and spoke softly as the tears continued to fall.

"I love you so much. I don't know what I would do without you." She felt him squeeze her hand and opened her eyes. He didn't need to say anything. She knew he was telling her that he loved her too just as he always did. He let

go of her hand and made a motion as best as he could. It looked as if he was trying to write something.

“You want a pen and paper?” Manny grunted and nodded his head. Keisha looked around and spotted a tablet and a pen on a table nearby. She grabbed it and gave it to him. Manny struggled to write and was only able to get out two letters.

“K I,” Keisha said as she looked at the paper. “K I? You want Kamir?” she asked him. Manny grunted again and shook his head. He then crossed his middle finger over his pointer finger and tapped the bed. Keisha looked at him confused and then looked at the paper. “Kiree...?” she said as she looked at Manny. Manny nodded his head. Keisha looked at Manny and then looked at the floor. She opened her mouth to speak but the words wouldn’t come. Manny searched her face and knew the situation wasn’t good. He grabbed the sheets and closed his eyes groaning. Keisha could hear him saying no repeatedly. She knelt beside him trying to calm him down. “I know baby, I know. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. But I need you to calm down and stay strong. You’ve gotta be strong for Kiree, and for Kamir and for me. We need you to get better. Please...” Keisha begged.

Manny breathed heavy and looked at her. Keisha could clearly see murder in his eyes. He made the hand motion for the pen and paper again. Keisha gave it to him. His hand shook as he struggled to write the word “Key”. He

then wrote out a series of numbers: 5, 24, 10, 26. Keisha looked at the numbers, confused. “My birthday and your birthday? I don’t understand.” She looked at the word *key* and then looked at the numbers. “The *key*?” Keisha asked. Manny nodded his head. It then became clear.

Outside of Manny’s brother Kiree, Keisha was the only one who knew where Manny kept his money. In the floor of their bedroom was a safe that Manny kept his money in along with two guns. He explained to Keisha that if anything were to happen to him, she was to *use the key*, take their son and get the hell out of dodge immediately. Today was that day.

“No Manny, I’m not leaving you. We’re in this together no matter what. You’re stuck with me, you understand?” Keisha said with tears in her eyes.

Manny hit the bed as hard as he could. He was dead serious. He suspected something was about to go down for a while but hoped that he made it out with Keisha and their son before the shit hit the fan. He grabbed her hand and squeezed it. “I love you,” he struggled to say. “You gotta go, now.”

Maurice came into the room. He looked at Manny and nodded. Manny stared at him momentarily and then looked back at Keisha. He pushed the paper into her hand and she made a fist around it. Their eyes locked and she nodded her head knowing exactly what she needed to do. She walked over to her brother.

“We’ve gotta go now,” she said to him.

“Go where?” Maurice asked.

“I can’t explain right now. Is your car here?” Keisha asked as they walked out of the door.

“Yeah, it is.” Before Maurice could ask another question, Keisha flagged down Angela.

“Grab Kamir, let’s go,” she instructed.

“Wait, don’t you want to stay here with Manny?” Angela asked confused.

“Look, I need both of y’all to stop asking me questions and just come the fuck on,” Keisha said through her teeth with fire in her eyes. She looked from her brother to Angela and then made her way over to the elevator. Neither of them noticed the guy in a chair pretending to read a newspaper. He was one of Samir’s men sent to watch them. He had just gotten the call from Samir to kill them all.

They jumped on the elevator and rode down to the garage. Neither Maurice nor Angela knew what to say to Keisha so they followed in silence. They made their way over to Maurice’s Dodge Charger and jumped inside. They were pulling out just as two of Samir’s men were coming into the garage.

“We just missed them,” one said to Samir on the phone.

“Follow them. And this time don’t fuck up,” Samir instructed.

They ran to their car and jumped in, following behind Maurice and Keisha.

Maurice's cell phone rang. It was Jamal. "Yo!" he answered.

"Yo, I just got off 95. I'm on my way down the way," Jamal told him.

"Is that Jamal?" Keisha asked.

"Yeah, hold on." Maurice said to his sister.

"No, tell Jamal to meet us at my apartment ASAP," Keisha said. She rattled off the address and Maurice repeated it to Jamal.

"Alright, I'll meet y'all there," Jamal said before disconnecting the call.

"Enough of this 007 shit, Keisha. What the fuck is going on? You better tell me and you better tell me now," Maurice demanded.

Keisha took a deep breath. "Manny told me to *use the key*." Keisha replied.

"Okay...am I supposed to know what that means?" Maurice asked sarcastically.

"Manny planned for this day but he hoped it never came. I need to get something from the apartment and bounce tonight. Manny doesn't think it's over."

They drove to her apartment and hopped on the elevator. When they got to her floor and made their way

down the hall, Keisha spotted D-Ball standing by her apartment door.

“What the hell are you doing here?” Keisha seethed as she marched over to him.

“Wait, Keisha. Before you go off on me let me explain. I just wanted you to know I ain’t leave Manny and Kiree hanging. I took them niggas out and then I had to go because the cops were coming. I only came by to give you something. Manny told me if anything were to happen to him, to tell you to use the key.” He reached into his pocket and put a piece of paper in her hand that had the same numbers written on them.

Keisha looked down at the paper that he placed in her hand. She frowned and shook her head as the tears came. “He’s still alive,” she said as she looked up at him.

D-Ball nodded his head. “I know. I called the hospital to find out.” Keisha unlocked the door and they all went inside. She instructed Angela to take her son in his bedroom and grab some of his clothes.

“They’re going to be coming for me next so I can’t stay long. I made a promise to Manny...” he trailed off and shook his head. “I told Kiree that Samir was setting us up,” he said angrily.

“So it was Samir,” Keisha concluded as she went inside of the floor where the safe was hidden.

“Fuck yeah it was him. That nigga wants Blumberg so bad. He’s strong arming all those niggas around there but he wasn’t trying to go up against us. We wasn’t trying to hear that shit. Fuck that nigga,” D-Ball replied. Maurice watched his sister as she pulled a gun from the safe and slammed a clip into it and checked to see if a round was chambered. Keisha caught the way he was looking at her.

Keisha sighed deeply. “Manny always wanted me to protect myself. He said: A girl can’t be too safe in these crime ridden times. After I got pregnant with Kamir, he made sure I got my license to carry and took me to the gun range on a regular.” Keisha explained as she loaded the second gun.

Maurice shook his head. “This shit is unreal...”

“No this shit just got real,” Keisha replied as she threw the money in a duffle bag. She took out an envelope and opened it. Inside was a copy of another lease to a house in Glenolden with a set of keys. She tucked everything back in the envelope and put it in her purse. She looked around at the apartment they shared for almost three years. The memories of all the love and happy moments made in their home flooded her mind. She shook her head as she fought back the tears. Maurice grabbed the duffle bag.

“Angie, let’s go!” Keisha called out. D-Ball opened the door and stepped out first with Keisha behind him. He looked up the hall and saw the two men dressed in leather jackets, sun glasses and snap back hats. He had a split second

to choose between grabbing his gun and pushing Keisha back into the apartment so she didn't get hit. Just as the first guy fired, he practically closed lined Keisha back into the apartment but not fast enough before a bullet caught him in his thigh. Keisha screamed. Maurice tried closing the door but D-Ball was caught in the door way.

“Move! Move!” D-Ball screamed at Maurice. He pulled both of his guns from his waist and fired out of the door causing the gunmen to jump back, giving D-Ball enough time to scoot inside of the apartment. Maurice slammed and locked the door.

“Get my son outta here!” Keisha screamed to Angela. Little Kamir was screaming and crying as he saw his Uncle D bleeding from his leg. They made their way to the back bedroom. Keisha closed their bedroom door. She then opened the bathroom window and closed the bathroom door. Lastly she closed the back bedroom door where they all were.

“Take my son down the fire escape Angie, now! Get him out of here now!” Keisha said to Angie.

“What about you?” Angie said as she backed up to the window.

“I'll be fine. Take D-Ball with you.” Keisha said.

“Fuck that, Keisha! You go with Angie and me and D-Ball will stay,” Maurice said as he snatched one of the guns from his sister.

“D-Ball is already hit. And I’m not leaving you,” Keisha said to her brother. She looked at D-Ball. “Thank you.”

“Don’t mention it,” D-Ball groaned as he hobbled to the window. They heard a shot outside of the apartment where someone was shooting one of the locks off. Keisha prayed like hell one of the neighbors called the cops. But she knew the chances of them getting there in time were slim to none. Angie helped Kamir out of the window. He cried for his mommy. Keisha told him she loved him. D-Ball was the last one out of the window. They made their way down the fire escape.

“I hope you know how to use that,” Keisha said to her brother as she slid over to one of the walk-in closets in the room. The two were in a great position to get the drop on an ambush before an ambush happened; one was behind the bedroom door and the other was across from it. Thankfully it was dark so you couldn’t tell when coming in the bedroom if the closet door was opened or closed.

“Remember that game on the 8 bit Nintendo we used to play; Duck Hunt?” Maurice replied. He made his way over to the other closet. “Well, those niggas are the ducks. And I’m the muthafucking hunter.” He backed into the closet and aimed at the bedroom door. Keisha backed into the other closet and crouched down also aiming at the door.

They heard when the gunmen entered the apartment. Keisha could hear her heart beating in her ears. Maurice kept his eyes on the door and said a prayer to himself. They heard when the gunmen kicked in the first bedroom door and then the bathroom. The door knob to the bedroom they were in turned and then opened slowly. Keisha thanked Manny for not putting the light bulbs in the ceiling fan like she asked him to for the last week. The first guy felt along the wall for the light switch and flicked it. When nothing happened he eased into the room. The light from the bathroom allowed Keisha to see him but he still could not see them. She aimed her gun and squeezed the trigger twice. The first bullet spun him around and the second bullet hit him in the chest, knocking him down. Maurice stayed put knowing that there was another gunman. Hearing the first two shots, the second gunman shot wildly in the room in Maurice's direction. Maurice took a hit and fell inside of the closet. Keisha screamed for her brother. She heard three more shots and then it was quiet.

Jamal pushed the door in aiming his gun at the gunman on the floor not moving. He kicked him.

“Maurice! Keisha!” Jamal called out.

Keisha scrambled from the closet. She turned a lamp on and then ran over to the closet that Maurice was in. Maurice was still alive but unconscious after taking a bullet in his side. Keisha cried hysterically.

“Keisha!” Jamal yelled. “He’s alive, but the cops are on their way. You need to do something with this money before they get here. Are there any drugs in here?” Jamal asked her.

“No, Manny never brought his work home,” Keisha said. She was getting dizzy. Today was too much for her to handle. She couldn’t believe she killed a man! She needed to sit down.

Jamal grabbed her by her shoulders and shook her to snap her back to reality and get her to understand she had mere minutes to make a move. “Keisha, listen to me. You need to do something with that money and now!”

Keisha scrambled back to her bedroom and moved the bed. She pulled the floor up and opened the safe. She threw the money back inside, locked the safe and put the floor back as it was with the bed over top. She tossed the duffle bag back inside of the closet and then went back to her brother. Jamal placed a pillow under his head and put a blanket over him as he called it in. Two white cops were the first ones on the scene.

“Hands on your head!” They shouted to Jamal when they saw him standing in the doorway of the apartment.

Jamal looked at them confused. “Wait...” he tried to say.

One of the cops moved closer to him aiming his gun. “Put your hands on your head where I can see them and

move against the wall!” Jamal did as he was told and shook his head.

“You got any weapons on you or any sharp objects that might stick me?” The cop asked as he put his gun in his holster. “What the fuck are you doing up here anyway, huh?” he asked in a smug tone.

Jamal shook his head as he spread his legs so he could be searched. “Yeah I do. I have my gun and I have my fucking badge, bitch. I’m a detective with the Wilmington DE Police Department.”

The officer patted him down. He took his gun and then found his badge on his waste. The other cop came behind him.

“Is that legit?” the second cop asked.

“I dunno. Call it in and find out. Until then, you sit your ass against that wall,” the first cop said smugly.

“Man while the two of you are busy jerking your dicks, my best friend is in there bleeding to death with his sister. It’s fucking ridiculous how you see a brother in a white apartment complex and automatically assume he’s a fucking criminal,” Jamal snapped.

“Spare me the racial speech Obama,” the cop said. Jamal shook his head.

Moments later the ambulance came down the hallway. They made their way inside of the apartment so they could help Maurice. Soon more cops followed and neighbors

began coming out of their apartments wanting to know what happened.

As they wheeled Maurice out on the stretcher, Keisha was right by his side. She saw Jamal on the floor.

“What the hell are y’all doing? He just saved my life and my brother’s life. He’s a detective, what the hell are y’all doing?” she asked hysterically.

“Keisha, go be with your brother, I got this.” Jamal told her.

“Ma’m we need to ask you some questions about what happened here,” one of the cops that were holding Jamal said to Keisha as he grabbed her arm.

“Get your fucking hands off of me. I’ve already answered their questions. I’m going to be with my brother. If y’all want to talk to me some more, contact my lawyer,” Keisha hissed as she snatched away from the officer. She ran down the hall to catch up with the medics and her brother.

“Hey,” the first cop said. “He checks out. Detective Jamal Williams with the DPD.” He tossed Jamal his badge. “Sorry about that. It’s just with the madness going on, we just couldn’t be sure.”

Jamal stood up and snatched his gun when it was held out to him. “Whatever.”

“This is way out of your jurisdiction. What are you doing here, anyway?” the second cop asked.

Jamal tucked his gun in the back of his pants. “The young lady that just left is the girlfriend of the man who rents this apartment. He was shot earlier and his brother was killed. They’re family of mine. I was coming from D-E when she asked me if I could meet her here. As I’m coming off the elevator, I heard gunshots. When I got down here, I saw blood on the floor and in the doorway and the lock was shot off. I heard more gunshots from inside of the apartment. I came in and did what I had to do,” Jamal explained.

“Is this some kind of drug thing?” the cop asked.

Jamal looked at him for a brief moment and then shrugged. “This is out of my jurisdiction, remember? You tell me.”