

PROLOGUE

“Ty, wake up, man! Please! I have to go home,” Sidney Monroe yelled as he frantically pulled on his sweat pants.

“Be quiet, man,” his groggy roommate responded as he buried his head deeper under the sheets.

“My sister just called screaming that my grandma had a stroke,” Sidney shouted in a panic. “Oh my God. And she said Curtis shot BJ in the house!”

“What?!” Now wide awake, Tyler Wilson, jumped from his bed in their dorm room and began kicking away the sheets that entangled his feet. “What?!” he shouted again, refusing to believe that this could be happening again.

Sidney was near tears. “I have to go home now! I don’t have any money. My brother shot my baby brother by accident. Nana had a stroke. My sister is hysterical, and who knows where my oldest brother is. All hell done broke loose, man. Please give me a ride home,” Sidney pleaded, already dressed and pacing around the room, holding his head with both hands.

“Aw, man. No question.” Tyler was finally fully untangled and immediately began slipping on his sweat pants and T-shirt. He grabbed his car keys from his desk with one hand and pulled on his sneakers with the other. “I don’t know where I’m going.”

“I’ll drive.”

Tyler looked at Sidney with concerned eyes. “You sure you’re up to it?”

“Yeah, man. I got it. Let’s go!”

“Head’s up,” Tyler said, throwing the keys. “I’m right behind you.”

“Got ’em.” Sidney snatched the keys out of midair, and then turned and bolted out the dorm room into the hallway lit only by exit signs at 2:00 in the morning. He ran down the hall, out the side door to the parking lot, and jumped in the black jeep. Tyler rounded the bend, hurdled over shrubberies, and was getting in the passenger side as Sidney turned the ignition.

“You got it, man,” Tyler encouraged in a sigh of relief as he watched Sidney buckle his seatbelt.

As they sped south on Interstate 95 at 92 miles per hour to the nation’s capitol from Baltimore, Sidney was praying in tongues.

“Do you want me to drive so you can pray?” Tyler asked nervously.

“I got it, man,” Sidney responded in a shaky voice.

“These cops probably won’t believe you think that 95 is the speed limit like I use to think when I was a kid.”

“I got it!”

“Okay, man. You got it,” Tyler relented as he quietly prayed the rest of the way.

The first things they saw in front of the Monroes' unit at the E Street Apartments in South East, Washington, DC, were police cars, emergency medical vehicles, and a fire truck.

"Jesus!" was all Tyler could say when they turned the corner and saw the mass of flashing lights.

Sidney stopped Tyler's jeep abruptly, threw it in park and jumped out.

"Park anywhere," he yelled as he ran toward the building.

Tyler slid into the driver's seat as he scanned the street for a place to park. Taking in the unfamiliar hood, he realized for the first time why Sidney never wanted him to visit.

"Nana!" Sidney yelled, as two DC Metro police officers forcefully prevented him from entering the crime scene. His shirt tore slightly as his body attempted to maintain its forward movement even after the officers had stopped and held him in check. Frustrated, Sidney gave up the physical struggle. "I live here. I have to see if my grandma is all right."

"Who's your grandmother, son?" The officer who asked the question looked to be in his fifties. His voice was soothing, but he unrelentingly held his grip.

"Della Monroe. Where is she?"

"Mrs. Monroe has been taken to Greater Southeast Community Hospital," the officer responded with compassion, only slightly loosening his hold.

"Where's my brother?"

"What's your brother's name?"

"Brandon James Monroe." As soon as the words left Sidney's mouth, the paramedics rolled a stretcher out of the building with a body completely covered.

Just then there was a loud scream followed by the shrill of, "Awwwww, my brother!"

Until that moment, Sidney hadn't noticed his sister, Paris Monroe, in all the confusion. She stood in the distance, making a feverish attempt to pull away from the neighbors who had apparently been consoling her. He turned from the officer, spotted the stretcher, and became paralyzed. Paris escaped, and unable to move to intercept her mission, Sidney watched as she reached the stretcher and pulled the sheet off BJ before the police could stop her. When he saw his brother's blood covered face with a bull's eye bullet hole through the middle of his forehead, there was no doubt that his baby brother was dead. Dread gut-punched Sidney, forcing him to bend over. He managed to slip from the officer's now loose hold and ran to grab his sister.

Emotions began to spill out as he was gripped with anger coupled with fear. "Where's Curtis?"

"I don't know. He ran when he realized what he did. It was an accident!" Paris fell into Sidney's arms.

Tyler was now standing a few feet away from his roommate, in shock, trying to comprehend the situation. He locked eyes with Sidney, then looked at BJ's face before the

officers replaced the sheet. The sight of the dead man's bloody and deformed face was too much for Tyler's weak stomach, and he regurgitated in the middle of the street.

Witnessing this, Sidney closed his eyes and rubbed his perfectly edged head that he himself had cut the day before. "I feel like I'm in a movie waiting for the director to yell, 'Cut'," he said to no one in particular.

"I'm right here, man." Tyler rubbed his own flat, tight abs to soothe his stomach while he tried to reassure Sidney.

"Oh yeah?" Sidney's dark brown eyes blazed on his face, now twisted with disgust. He pointed toward the puke that still lay fresh in the street. "Look at you," he charged.

"I'm sorry. I'm okay now, man. I'm here for you."

"Ms. Monroe, you have to come to the police station to make a statement," one of the officers interrupted.

Paris grabbed Sidney's arm tightly like she needed to get his opinion. Should she, or shouldn't she?

Shaking his head to clear it, Sidney was able to make some decisions. He took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. "You go with the police, Paris. I'll get Tyler to bring me down there right after I go to the hospital to check on Nana."

"No, come with me now!" Paris cried, squeezing his arm even tighter.

"I have to see if Nana is all right. Then I'll come to the police station with you, okay?"

"No, I want to go with you," she insisted.

"You'll be all right, Ms. Monroe," the officer said in that soothing voice of his.

Right then, Pearl, Nana's best friend since they discovered, when they were both ten years old that they were born on the same day and had celebrated their birthdays together for the last 52 years, came over to offer even more help. In her arms, she was holding Paris's unbelievably quiet two-year-old daughter, Shasta. "I'll go with you, Paris," she offered.

Sidney looked at the woman with a relieved half-smile. "Thanks, Ms. Pearl." Then turning his attention back to Paris, he said, "Sis, I promise. I'll be there as soon as I find out how Nana's doing."

"Okay. But hurry up, Sidney. Please hurry," Paris cried, as she took Shasta from Pearl and held her tight. The child, who hardly ever cried, looked amazed at all of the confusion.

"I will, sis," Sidney managed to calmly say as he struggled to maintain his composure.

At the hospital, Sidney and Tyler were informed that Mrs. Della Monroe had suffered a stroke and was in critical condition.

"Mrs. Monroe will be in intensive care for the time being," Dr. Gillett told the roommates.

Sidney's head was spinning like a top.

"What do you want to do, Sid?" Tyler asked.

"My world has gone mad, man; right along with the rest of the world."

“Keep saying to yourself, ‘Jesus has overcome the world, Jesus has overcome the world, Jesus has overcome the world,’” Tyler instructed.

In obedience, Sidney repeated, “Jesus has overcome the world, Jesus has overcome the world.” He kept whispering it until he felt a burst of strength that caused him to stand up straight. His shoulders automatically went back, and his chest out with the revelation that he had to take charge in the absence of his oldest brother, Wendell. “There’s nothing we can do here. Let’s go to the police station.”

When Sidney and Tyler arrived at the precinct, they saw Paris, Pearl, and Shasta sitting in the waiting area; his sister much calmer than the last time he saw her. Paris glanced up as the two approached.

“How’s Nana?” she slowly asked. Her voice was uncommonly mellow.

“She’s going to be fine.” Sidney’s positive response was followed by an inquisitive glance toward Pearl. He was relieved with his sister’s composure, but still questioned how it had changed so drastically since her earlier meltdown.

As though Pearl could read the question that was foremost in Sidney’s mind, she mouthed the word ‘Valium.’

Sidney nodded, and then looked back at Paris. “Did you give a statement yet?”

“I told them it was an accident, but Curt was so scared, he ran. Now the cops are out there looking for him. And you know these trigger happy cops.”

“We have to find him,” Sidney said, turning to his roommate.

“Whatever you need me to do, I’m here for you,” Tyler said firmly in an effort of support and redemption.

Suddenly realizing Tyler was out of his element, Sidney looked at his roommate with gratitude, thankful for the good friends he’d met in college who were polar opposites from his childhood buddies. However, those buddies were the ones he needed now. “Thanks, man, but I have to find Wendell. Go back to school. This is not your world; not your problem. Just go back and get the group to pray.”

A little relieved, Tyler asked, “Are you sure man? I mean, how will you get home?”

“I’ll take them,” Pearl chimed in, listening to every word of the conversation.

Sidney nodded to Pearl. “See, man; go on back to school. You couldn’t survive on these mean DC streets, and that’s where I’m going to have to go.”

Obviously torn between concern for his roommate and concern for his own safety, Tyler’s loyalty prevailed. “I can’t leave you like this man. At least let me stay until you find Wendell.”

“I appreciate that, bruh. I’ll be all right. Jesus and my angels are with me. Besides I don’t know when I’ll be back to school.”

Tyler looked like he was trying to think of something to say, but couldn’t find the words.

“I know you’re thinking about my finals that start tomorrow. It’s okay, man.” Sidney assured his friend. “Go on back. For real. Either we believe what we learn at Bible study, or we don’t. I have no choice but to believe. Now is the time to put the Word of God to the test.”