

**God gave Noah the rainbow sign**

**No more water, the fire next time**

**--Anonymous, Spiritual**

My whole life, I've never been brave. I've never stared down anything that didn't whip my ass first. That's the way it is with me, always thinking what I should have done after the time to do it was over.

That's how it was that hot August night, when those three white kids piled out of that black Land Rover screaming, "Nigger-thieves, go back to the jungle!" I was running scared before I ever saw the metal baseball bat one of them was swinging.

Deep down, I knew they were part right. I was a damn thief. I'd crossed Decatur Avenue into Hillsboro with Bonds and Asa, looking for a Lexus to heist. But I was no "nigger," not the way they meant it, even if that's what me and my friends called each other all the time.

I tripped on the cracked sidewalk, banging my chin on the concrete and scraping my palms raw. Bonds and Asa jetted down the block like their asses were lit on fire. But before I could get back up, those racist bastards were right on top of me.

I recognized the fat kid from around school—before he'd dropped out. I never knew his name. He cocked the bat in both hands, and I nearly shit myself.

The skinny dude was kicking at me when I heard the air whistle next to my left ear. *CRACK!* The fat kid had slammed me in the side of the head with that bat, and a lightning bolt of pain shot through me.

I could feel the warm blood on my face. It tasted bitter as it dripped into my mouth. For a few seconds I was seeing double, and there were six of them instead of three.

"You wanna steal from white people, huh?" screamed the tall kid with the goatee, trying to take the sneakers off my feet. "See how *you* like it!"

My legs started peddling on instinct, like I was on a ten-speed, fighting him off.

"Give 'em over!" barked the fat kid through his clenched teeth, cocking the bat again.

I brought my arms up to protect my skull. That's when the fight in my legs quit, and they stole the sneakers. Then the tall kid dug his nails into my ear, ripping out the diamond stud. I tried to slam my fist down on his foot. But I missed, and punched the pavement instead.

They howled over that and got back into their Land Rover, giving each other high-fives like they'd just won some big ball game.

My head was pounding so bad it hurt to think, but I reached into my pocket for my cell and called Bonds.

"I need help bad," I said. "I got beat with a bat."

Then Bonds must have called 911, because a minute later I heard sirens twisting through the streets, till the cops and EMS arrived.

The next time I saw that aluminum bat, detectives were asking me to ID it in the hospital. I was lying in the intensive care unit with tubes coming out of my arms.

Dad, Mom, and Grandma were there, too.

The bat was sealed up inside a plastic bag.

Mom shrieked at the sight of it, squeezing my hand so tight she almost cut off my pulse.

"Lord, no!" she cried. "They didn't use that on my baby!"

The meat part of the bat was stained with my blood, and some of my hair was stuck on that spot.

It was like somebody had pulled a nightmare out of my brain, holding it up in the light for me to look at.

I reached out to touch it, just to feel how solid it really was. Only the detective wouldn't let me.

"Rules of evidence," he said.

My eyes moved slowly up its black handle, with every part of me shaking. Then I saw the logo across the red aluminum barrel-- the gold letters that spelled out R-E-S-P-O-N-S-E.

## **Chapter One**

That afternoon, Asa had pitched us his plan on the bench outside the Chinese take-out joint. He'd seen his uncle hot-wire his aunt's car after she lost the keys, and said it was *too* easy.

"I only needed to see it one time, Noah," he told me, between forkfuls of pork fried rice. "We can get six-G's from the dude down at the chop shop for a Lex, any model. All we got to do is snatch one, deliver it, and walk away rich."

"A Lex is worth tons more than that," Bonds said.

"Yeah, but we'd only be on the hook from the time we snatched it till we dropped it off," argued Asa. "That could be just five or six minutes work."

I was beat tired of hearing my baby's moms bitch over the fifty bucks I gave her every week from my part-time job at Mickey D's. That was more money than I took for myself, but my baby daughter was worth it.

I was going to be a "super senior" at Carver High School that September. I fell into that fifth-year hole last semester when Deshawna gave birth, and it got impossible to keep my mind on studying with everything I had to do for the baby.

But if I buckled down and passed the couple of classes I had left, I could graduate by the end of January. And I wanted to get into a city college bad, and maybe study to be an engineer like I always wanted, especially since I'd seen how it was to slave for minimum wage.

This car gig was going to be the easy way, quicker than graduating for now. It was going to shut up Deshawna about money, and get me more respect with her dad. Then my own family wouldn't have to spend a dime on my daughter neither, and I could finally stop my father from saying, "Of course Noah needs help. He's just a kid supporting a kid."

Hearing Dad's voice say those words in my head helped push me in that direction.

"You know what? Count me in. It ain't hurtin' nobody. People's insurance companies will cover it," I said, wiping the grease from an egg roll off my fingers and putting a fist out in front of me. "Besides, I gotta be a man and make some real moves with my life."

Then Asa and Bonds stuck out their fists, too, and we connected on a three-way pound.

"But listen, anybody with a whip that fly in *this* hood's got juice. They're either a cop or corrections officer, or runnin' game on the street," said Bonds. "We don't need those headaches. Let's slip into Hillsboro and rip off some senior citizen-white folks. The kind that's so old, it might be two days 'fore they figure out their ride's gone."

We'd been up there plenty of times before to go to the big multiplex and the mall. And Hillsboro had the best pizza parlors anywhere, because it was mostly Italian. But we knew those Guido kids didn't want us hanging around their neighborhoods. Most people who lived there, Italian or anything else, looked at us like being black was something dirty and we weren't as good as them.

It didn't matter that Carver High was on the borderline between East Franklin, where *we* live, and Hillsboro. Lots of white kids who went to school with us thought the same racist way, only on the down low, out of fear of catching a black foot in their behind. I'd even heard dudes from the *other* high school in Hillsboro, Armstong High, rank on white kids at Carver, calling them "zookeepers" for having to sit in class next to us.

"And if we're gonna snatch somebody's ride," Asa said with a smile. "It'll be sweeter doin' it there."

"Maybe we can dress up in monkey suits and say we're valet parking. They'll just hand us the damn keys," cracked Bonds.

"We just gotta watch our backs. That's all," I warned them. "'Cause the ones that really hate us are all together on it."

After that, we put together all the little details. Then we went our separate ways home waiting for it to get dark, so we could turn our talk into action.

That night, it was steaming outside. Everybody in the city must have had their electricity on, because all the lights in our apartment were dim and the air coming out of the AC was barely cool.

Half the people in our apartment building were on the front stoop trying to catch a breeze. Dad was playing dominoes at a fold up table, with his subway conductor's shirt wide open. He was holding seven white tiles at one time, stretched across the fingers of his two huge hands.

Mom and Grandma were talking to a bunch of neighbor women, and I could hear Grandma's strong voice over them all.

"That's not how young folks did it in my day," she said. "They acted proper and had more pride in themselves."

I'd already snuck a screwdriver out of my father's tool chest, hiding it in the back pocket of my pants. When it hit 8:45, I started down the street.

"Where you off to, Noah?" Dad called after me, slamming down a domino.

Before I could answer, Mom yelled, "He'd better be checking up on that daughter of his!"

"Right now I'm doin' it!" I hollered back, pointing to my cell as I kept on walking.

"Oh, it's you, playa," Deshawna answered, giving me the cold shoulder before she put the phone up to my daughter's ear.

"Destiny Love, this is your daddy," I said sweet. "Who's the best girl in the whole wide world? Tell me, who?"

I could hear her making noise at the sound of my voice, slapping at the phone. And right then, I wished for anything that she was cradled warm inside my arms.

Deshawna got back on and I ran her a script about the big payday I had coming.

"My boy's uncle owns a car dealership," I said. "We're gonna do some construction work on the lot for him at night-- sharpen up on my building skills. That's where I'm headed now. If it goes smooth, I'll be able to triple the money I been giving you and treat you to Red Lobster for your B-day, too, Boo."

"I know lately you been tryin' extra hard to do your share, Noah," she said, melting down. "I see it. Even my dad's off your case some. I really do love you."

"I feel you," I answered.

I met up with Asa and Bonds at nine o'clock sharp. They were strapped down with the other tools we needed—wire cutters, flashlight and a Slim-Jim. Then we crossed Decatur Avenue into Hillsboro and kept our heads on a swivel.

After about a half-hour, we spotted a Lex on a dark side street, parked in the driveway of a private house. We walked around the block twice just to check things out. Then we crouched down low by the gate, waiting for the courage to move.

Bonds took the Slim-Jim out from under his shirt, whispering, "I'm ready to do my thing."

But as soon as Bonds started fishing for the latch to open the driver's door, there was a noise from across the street and we just froze up solid like stone statues.

An old lady dragged her trashcan all the way to the curb, with a little yappy dog barking its head off behind her—*Yapppp! Yapppp! Yapppp!*

Finally, they disappeared inside a house and Bonds got back to business.

I heard the latch on the car door spring open.

That's when a light on the second floor of that crib, over the driveway where we were, came on. I'm not sure who, but one us screamed soft, "*Go! Go!*"

We shot out of that yard quick, and our feet didn't stop moving till we were two blocks down and an avenue over.

"Niggas can't get jumpy over every little shit," complained Asa, breathing hard. "There's gonna be some risk."

"Noah, wasn't this boy the first one hauling ass?" Bonds asked between breaths, annoyed as anything.

But the bottom of my kicks had burned rubber, too, and I wasn't about to front over having nerves of steel.

"We *all* looked like kindergarten crooks," I said, flat out.

Mario's Pizza came up on the other side of the street, so we cooled our jets and went inside for a slice. There was a map of Italy, looking like a boot, painted up on the wall. A rotating floor fan was blowing hard, and little red, white, and green flag taped to the cash register flapped in that breeze.

Two Guido kids with slicked-back hair and gold chains were sitting at a side table, giving us the evil eye. And the chain on the one who had a goatee was thick enough to get us nearly as much cheddar as a hot car.

But I'd have rather made him eat it, instead, for giving us that look.

We each ordered a slice and a soda, and the dude behind the counter smirked, “Is that order to go?”

“Nah, too much heat out there,” Asa answered with some attitude.

The goateed kid yelled out to that dude, "Hey, Sal! Make me an order of eggplant Parmesan—Moolie style!"

That's what Italian assholes called us, "Moolies."

In their tongue, *mollinyan* meant eggplant. That was their codeword for nigger, because we were black like eggplants.

Asa stared that kid down fierce, drawing the bottom half of a circle under his neck with a finger to show that Guido's gold chain could have been ours if we wanted it. But we finished our food and got out of there without any trouble.

Our stomachs were heavy by then, so we gave up on the idea of boosting a Lex that night.

There wasn't a dark cloud I could see anywhere, but streaks of heat lightning kept crackling across the sky as we headed back towards East Franklin. We even walked the long way around, steering clear of Columbus Park—the place almost everybody called “Spaghetti Park,” the Guidos’ main turf.

We were just three blocks from Decatur Ave. when those two dudes from the pizza parlor and that fat kid swinging the baseball bat jumped out of the Land Rover screaming, "Niggers!"

## Charlie Scat

*Nobody's snatching Joey's chain. Nobody. Not here. Not while I'm still breathing. My crew knows who to call when shit jumps off. I couldn't get dressed and out of my front door fast enough. I hate these nigger-thieves. Hate them. They know where they belong-- East Franklin. Not by us. First, they piss all over their own neighborhood till it's nothing but stink. Now they want to do they same here? Fuck that.*

"That them? There? I'll pull over! Everybody out, quick!"

*Look at 'em run. That's it. Be scared.*

*Shit. That one bagged himself.*

*Stay right there. Stay down, you mother.*

"Leave 'em, Tommy! Move outta the way!"

*Taste bat.*

*I'll split his damn skull like a coconut.*

"Yeah! Take his shoes, Joey! Take those shits!"

*Go ahead, do something. Try it. I'll give you another taste of this.*

"Rip his earring out! Rip It!"

*He probably stuck up somebody's grandmother to buy that bling crap.*

"Don't let his blood touch you! Don't touch it, you'll catch somethin'!"

*No fight in him. Nothing. Another coward.*

*Only with half their projects behind 'em they act tough.*

*I'm supposed to sit in school with them. No way.*

*That's another thing they fucked up, with their music and gangs.*

*They think they can get our girls, too.*

*Kiss my fat ass now. Kiss it, mother.*

*I'm never getting in line behind you. Never. I'm far back enough.*

*Remember who am I.*

*I told you. I told you who I was.*

*"Gimmie five! Yeah! Gimmie some skin, boys!"*

*I'm somebody with this bat.*

*I told you. See.*