

## ***Prologue***

### **THE START OF A WAR**

*It was early enough* in the morning to desire sleep, yet late enough to take in the aroma seeping

through a window on the block of someone frying their morning bacon. Chase rushed to the driveway of the abandoned three-family tenement on 16th Street where he and his crew peddled their dope to re-up.

Despite the early morning hours, the block was jumping with customers, dope fiends and hustlers alike. The flow on Saturday usually stayed heavy especially from the 1st of the month to the 15th which was a prime time for dealers of all kinds of drugs—coke, dope, ecstasy pills and weed to get their hustle on.

“Nisi!” Chase yelled with an authoritative command. “Take your stinking ass in the back of the house and go get me some more dope,” he barked his order from the edge of the driveway while counting the few thousand dollars that he had just made in under an hour.

Nisi, with the looks of a well-fed stripper and an attitude to match, sucked her teeth through a set of glossy, full lips and responded, “Fuck you Chase! You ain’t gotta ask me like that. What, you still mad you couldn’t take me home last night?”

After displaying her hooker-like attitude, Nisi rolled her eyes and signed Chase with two middle fingers as she stood at the northern end of the driveway with her ass poked out in the air. Chase thought her ass was so nice and fat that it appeared she had two Christmas hams stuffed in the back pockets of her jeans.

Nisi was a hoodrat Chase and Tamir paid to stash their dope for them in the back of the abandoned house where they hustled, and she knew just how to use her assets. Her pheromonic charms were spewing out onto Tamir as she bent over bracing herself with one hand on his knee, and caressing his cornrows with the fingertips of her other. She stared deeply into Tamir’s eyes with seduction, all the while ignoring Chase’s command.

Even with his eyes downward continuing to count his cash, Chase lusted over Nisi's fine ass body. From time to time, he would glance upward and shake his head as if to say Tamir was a fool for letting her even play him so close.

"Hey, Tamir!" Chase called out. "Why don't you leave that bitch alone, and tell her to go and do her job? You might fuck around and catch something from that bitch anyway."

For the longest, Chase had been hitting on Nisi, but she never gave him any play, despite the fact she worked for him. Truth of the matter was he didn't know how to talk to a female. His expertise only fell within the realm of getting money. His facial expression was painted with jealousy as Tamir sat by the steps in his wheelchair grinning at him.

Nisi's eyes peered over her shoulder toward him as well. She batted her eyelashes, and licked out her tongue at Chase as she flipped him another middle finger, taunting him. "You just mad you ain't getting any play from a bitch like me."

Chase returned his eyes to the stack of cash in his hands and said, "I'm only saying, ain't no fun if the homie can't have none. Now, take your ass and go get that for me like I asked!"

"Humph," Nisi said, rolling her eyes.

"Man," Chase said, turning his attention to Tamir. "The block's jumping right now and you out here fucking around with this ho! This new batch of Blackjack Demonte fronted us must be good, 'cause the dope fiends out here cluckin' for this shit."

Tamir listened as if Chase was teaching Hustle 101. He always recognized the truth whenever it came to his ears and he immediately got focused. "Yo, I ain't going nowhere ma, this dick'll be here for you. When me and Chase shut down the block, I'ma holla then."

Chase or no Chase, if Tamir ordered Nisi to do something you could believe it was getting done because Tamir was the man. He had been shot in the spine a few years back and confined to a wheelchair, but being paralyzed didn't stop his swag one bit, because he sexed just as many women as any nigga getting around on two legs. Tamir had Blackjack on six blocks starting from 13th Street up to 19th Street off of 16th Avenue. He owned a condo in Teaneck, and drove a black Maserati with a cocaine white leather gut. Chase

was in charge of the runners in the six-block radius, and all Tamir had to do was sit back and watch their money stack.

Chase was Tamir's protégé and lieutenant of his six-blocks. Anybody coming or going, doping or blowing had to go through Chase. At the moment, however, he had given the three runners on the block the morning off, an opportunity they used to shoot a game of C-low. Chase felt like his old self slinging dope like he used to back when he and Tamir had first started getting work from Demonte on consignment. In fact, by 8 a.m. that morning, he had sold twenty bricks hand-to-hand all by himself.

Nisi screaming on Chase the way that she did reminded him that he'd went out to the Fox Trap Bar last night. He had taken three ecstasy pills and chased them down with a bottle of Merlot. He felt the pills and liquor boosted his swag to talk women into sex. But every woman he pushed up on had turned him down, especially Nisi, who was out last night at the Trap with a few of her girls.

Chase left the bar at 3 a.m. which was closing time. All night he hadn't slept because the effect of the pills had his dick on solid. His mouth was dry, his teeth were grinding and his heart beat inside his chest like the Energizer Bunny beating his drum. His main girl Sequoia was out of town and instead of going home early to an empty bed after a night of letdowns, he decided to hit the block and get his hustle on.

It was a good thing he did, too, because hustlers and dope fiends were out in swarms looking to cop dope. The dope fiends' EBT cards had been activated with funds as of 12 a.m. that morning. Every 1st of the month, they would hit the nearest Bodega and trade in their food stamps for cash, then be off and running to the nearest dope block to ease their aches and pangs.

Doo-Doo, Poo, and Flags were in the driveway smoking blunts, drinking Hennessy, talking shit shooting dice. All of a sudden Poo lost interest in the game and said, "Ay, Demarco's home," as if the rest of his crew had no idea of who he was talking about, he asked, "Y'all know ... Demonte's twin? The nigga fuckin' up the game, crazy since he's been out. Demonte is the sensible one, but Demarco's on some other shit. Going around saying nobody's getting fronted his brother's dope anymore."

As the words spilled from Poo's mouth, he took off his Yankees fitted cap and wiped the beaded sweat from his forehead and goatee. After dealing with the heat, he shifted his eyes toward Tamir and continued, "Tamir, man, he's smearing dirt on your name too. Some shit about you told on him back in the day. Most of your runners on the other blocks talking about quitting and siding with Demarco. He's got this team, and they taking over the dope game, they say."

Nisi no longer held Tamir's attention as he looked through her toward Poo with anger and asked, "He got niggas shook? You thinking about hustling for 'em too? 'Cause that's what it sounds like, you talking all crazy!" he said as he focused back on Poo. "Fuck that! I need to recruit more thoroughbreds then, real talk!"

"I'm saying, yo. Demarco's a killer, and he's got shooters down with him. Two crazy New Orleans niggas. Who you got? Doo-Doo, Flags, and Chase? Huh? Word on the street is he's the reason you in that wheelchair. Look ... Tamir, I'm trying to get money out here in these streets. Not shot, and end up like you in a wheelchair or worse ... bodied, my nigga!"

Poo swiped his money up from the ground and then turned on his heels heading out the driveway. Everybody stared with disbelief as he peered back over his shoulder and said, "Yo, Tamir. Demarco told me, it's get down or lay down, and I chose to get down homie. If I were you, I would get down with The Family. Maybe Demarco will be forgiving."

Poo made his way into the middle of the street with his cell phone to his ear. He kept his stride refusing to look back until Tamir, Chase, Doo-Doo, Flags, and Nisi couldn't see him anymore.

Moments later, a black Tahoe raced to the curb. Its tints were as black as its paint job was. The only thing outshining its chrome rims was Rocka Fella's *1-900-Hustler* blaring from the subwoofers. Nobody considered it an unusual sight for the beginning of the month because hustlers would come through on a regular, flossing their whips, while copping bricks of dope wholesale. At \$150 a pop, other hustlers copped weight and went to G off on their own blocks. Word spread quickly that Blackjack was the most popular stamp that Demonte had ever come away from the table with thus far.

Chase bobbed his head to the music as the passenger side window eased down letting the music out into the atmosphere. Everyone in the driveway eyed the truck; everyone except for Doo-Doo who was too busy picking up bunches of crinkled bills he had just won off of Flags' last roll of the dice.

"Ay, whoadie!" the driver of the Tahoe yelled out of the window over his passenger with a New Orleans accent. "You in the wheelchair, you got bricks of Blackjack?"

Tamir with his mind on money that quick had forgotten what Poo had said only minutes ago about the two crazy New Orleans shooters Demarco had down with him. Not paying any attention to the man's accent Tamir cranked his chair forward shouting, "Yeah, I got 'em. How many you want?"

As the exchange of words took place a dope fiend on the block looking to cop ducked down behind a parked car. Chase on the other hand noticed the accent and began easing toward the Tahoe with his hand tucked underneath his shirt showing a clear sign he was strapped. His face was fixed in a snarl, clutching the pistol's handle.

"Tamir!" Chase yelled. "Fall back homie. I got this, yo." Easing closer toward the Tahoe, he continued, "You mu'fuckas know the shit's out here. Park the truck and get out if you wanna get served. Fuck how many you want, and turn the fucking musi -"

Suddenly, the back driver side window creaked its way open as well. At that moment Chase was staring into the nose and nozzle of a semiautomatic AK-47, and all of his tough talk came to a pause as his life sprinted between his eyes. It was to the point where he was unable to think or make a move to draw his pistol from his waistband.

The nerves in the back of his neck vibrated down his spine causing his entire body to seize. He felt as though his feet were part of the pavement beneath him.

Unable to move.

Barely able to breathe.

His eyes widened as if he were a deer preparing for the impact of a speeding car.

His thoughts were ricocheting around in his mind.

*Should I try and run?*

*Do I have time to pull my strap?* he asked himself those questions, but he was awarded the time to do neither.

*Nah, these niggas got the drop on me* was Chase's final thought before shots clapped like thunder from the AK, concussing three bullets into his chest.

The impact forced his feet into the air and sent him back crashing to the driveway's blacktop.

Gasping.

Bleeding.

It seemed as if he were trying to draw in air through the holes in his chest. His throat gurgled loudly with wheezing noises from his chest and mouth as his mud-colored blood leaked into the crevices of the driveway.

The gunman wasn't yet finished his assault. He shifted his aim toward Tamir, Nisi, Flags, and Doo-Doo, squeezing off shots without a hint of hesitation. The projectiles bounced and skipped across the pavement ricocheting off Tamir's wheelchair. Even under the sun light, sparks of the bullets could be seen like fireworks dancing across the asphalt.

The scene unraveled like a slow motion picture, but Tamir and his crew were a far cry from actors as their cries of frets haunted the entire block. Even those who were free from the line of fire found themselves ducking and diving for cover.

An unknown someone had to have called the police because sirens were heard blaring in the distance as they neared. Just seconds after the shooting ceased, a squad car emerged onto the block. But the SUV and its occupants were already screeching away, leaving a trail of bodies clouded by white gun smoke. As the Tahoe rounded the corner heading down the hill, spent shell casings could still be heard striking the pavement like they were metallic raindrops. Another Newark black-and-white had arrived on the scene and tried to give chase.

Too little.

Too late.

The driver of the Tahoe was just too good at the wheel.

Which started the beginning of a war.

Welcome to *The Cost of the Game*...First of a trilogy....

## I

### ***GET YOUR MIND RIGHT***

*As the sun reached* its full potential, the heat index was unbearable. The thick, fuming air seemed as though it were sweating. Residents of the neighborhood hung around watching not knowing what to expect

since hearing the news reports of the mayor and the police commissioner declaring a war on drugs in the city.

Detective Sean L. Bookum and his partner of five years, Detective Philip A. Keys, began their day with a call to a murder in the West Ward. A team of junior detectives all dressed in cheap, polyester suits affordable on a detective's salary were at their disposal.

The chief of police, Andrew Blum forced his detectives to adopt a look-professional-act-professional philosophy when it came to solving cases; even though his overweight frame and cocky attitude was often the complete opposite of professional.

The detectives donned their tight suit jackets accompanied by choking neckties in the oppressive heat. It was an attempt to appear sophisticated and unified, but only showed the residents of the neighborhood what a bunch of stuck-up assholes they really were.

Bookum and Keys, who were the two lead detectives on the case, strolled around the outskirts of the crime scene in search of any possible eyewitnesses. The drug addicts and alcoholics from the neighborhood were usually their best source of information; but today, however, no one, not even one nosy neighbor, was in a talkative mood.

It was a good twenty minutes before Bookum came across a dope fiend willing to talk. The detective was surprised it had taken this long since the drug addict was known for being a fink for reward money. The days of snitching for a bag of smack and nod no longer cut it for the fiend. He wanted the whole pot; a good five or ten G's to sustain his heroin habit for the rest of the summer.

Like most snitches, he began spitting out words like a national spelling bee champ. The dope fiend had a quick way of speaking like a used car salesman, but he would drool from the sides of his mouth due to his constant taste for heroin. In fact, the dope fiend was still feeling the effects of his last high. He nodded so low that Bookum thought he might tip over. So the detective found him a crate to sit on, which only added to the problem because the dope fiend was now more relaxed sitting down than he was standing, going in and out of his nods.



After shaking the drug addict by his shoulder and loudly snapping his fingers a few times the detective said, “Whoa ... wake up there, buddy. You’re gonna have to stay awake and slow down some when you speak to me so that I can get your story straight.”

The dope fiend came out of his brief nod, using the back of his puffy veinless hand, due to the many years of abusing drugs and sticking needles in it, to wipe the drool from the bottom of his lip.

*Why, me?* Bookum thought to himself. Almost as if he hated to continue, he questioned, “So, Mr. Palmer, you say you came to this block to buy heroin. Is that correct, sir?” Bookum asked taking a minute to slap him out of another nod.

“Huh? Huh? Oh, yeah, yeah.”

“You say you saw one of the dealers leaving the driveway while talking to someone on his cell phone? After that, you said a black late-model SUV with tinted windows came driving down the block with loud music, yada, yada, yada. Then the truck stopped at this abandoned house here,” Bookum glared up at the house. “Uh, 187 South 16th. Am I correct so far, sir?” he asked in succession.

Hearing only the word sir, the dope fiend shook his own head in order to rouse himself from another nod. “Yeah, yeah,” he responded. “That’s just how I said the whole thing happened.”

Detective Bookum kept his eyes trained on his writing pad so that he wouldn’t have to breathe in the disgusting sight of the drug addict any longer. Next, he asked, “And you say you heard a few words being exchanged between somebody in the SUV with an accent and one of the victims, but you were unable to make out anything they were saying because you were busy taking cover behind a car? Then, that’s when this ... Marco character opened fire with a gun?”

“Yeah, man,” the dope fiend agitatedly responded, almost as if the name Marco rattled his nerves. “That’s what I said. Get the donuts off your mind, Bookum,” again falling into a nod, but then springing back awake. “And ake sure you get my name right this time around. It’s Craig! C-R-A-I-G, Palmer! P-A-L-M-E-R.”

“Hmph, a reward, huh?” Bookum snickered underneath his breath at the audacity of the drug addict. “The only fucking reward you need is a coupon for a stay at a rehabilitation facility.” He nudged the dope

fiend in the side of his head, though it was more like a slap, “Now, wake your junky-ass up!” When Craig snapped back to attention, the detective asked, “Now, how long have you known this Marco guy? And can you point him out in a line up?”

Almost as if the detective had spoken another language, “What?” Craig yelled. “Man, I don’t know him like that! You trying to get me shot or somethin’? Him and his brother, they run the dope game out here.” Taking pause, the dope fiend’s mind veered into a deep thought about something the detective had said to him.

Bookum couldn’t help but laugh. He shook his head as if he pitied the drug addict a little, at the same time, reaching inside his extremely tight pocket. “Here, take my card,” he said with a smug smile, even though he knew Craig would never take his card in front of a nosy crowd of spectators. “Come down to the precinct tomorrow, and I’ll show you a couple of mug shots. If you pick out this Marco, then and only then, maybe we’ll talk about reward money.”

In desperate need of the money, Craig cautiously looked around to make sure no one was watching him before taking the detective’s card from him, quickly stuffing it into his pocket.

Television news reports were like such.

Four suspected drug dealers and a young woman were in the driveway of an abandoned three-family tenement—possibly the dealers’ normal hangout. It is reported a black SUV drove up to the house and used its occupants for target practice, allegedly testing the limits of their new assault weapon. The Newark police responded earlier today to the all-too-familiar shooting of this urban area.

One Tamir Muhammad, age 25, the son of a Newark police officer, was shot dead with a bullet to his head. Reports from the scene say that the right side of his face could be seen spilled atop the driveway’s black top. Another victim, Nisi Ward, was pronounced dead on arrival. Her body was found almost cut in half from a large semiautomatic assault weapon.

Newark Police Officials say they won’t be exactly sure what kind of weapon was used until after conducting a ballistics test on the slugs. Also on the scene were a Frederick Moore, age 21 aka Flags and Donique James, age 23 aka Doo-Doo; both whom only suffered minor injuries. Another victim, however,

as of now known only by Chase was rushed to the University Hospital in Newark. Reports have him listed as in critical condition. Hospital officials say he was barely alive. Stay tuned for further details.

Still out on the scene, Detectives Bookum and Keys bagged and tagged the evidence that was left over in the driveway after the dope fiends in search of drugs had contaminated their crime scene. They had to move with a bit of urgency because a pipe had been struck by a ricocheting bullet. The spewing water was damaging all potential evidence, as well as washing the slain victim's spilled blood from the driveway out into the gutter of the street.

Besides the information Bookum gathered from dope fiend Craig, the two detectives hadn't a clue as to the what and the why of the situation. To them, it was just another shooting over drugs. The one thing that they did know for certain was that whoever was responsible possessed the sort of fire power that could be used in a small-scale war.

Bookum and Keys also did not know Demarco had been released from prison six months prior after serving five years for the attempted murder of Tamir Muhammad. They had no way of knowing Demarco was back to reclaim his position in the streets; he returned to solidify what he and his twin started. His motto—get down or lay down—meant, whether they knew it or not that all competitors were about to conform to the rules of The Family's game or either they would all be taking a dirt nap after the streets flowed red with blood.

Both Bookum and Keys couldn't possibly fathom what was in store for the streets of Newark. They would soon discover that today's murders were less about money and more about revenge. As far as Demarco was concerned ... there would be no more handouts.

The entire time Demarco was on lock down, his twin did everything he was supposed to do. He kept his commissary stacked with money making sure he wanted for nothing. The one thing he did not do was explain exactly how he was keeping their hustle going. But since news from the streets spread in prison faster than gossip on social media, Demarco was well aware of how Demonte was conducting their business, and he was certain in his absence his twin had gotten too soft on their customers in the streets.

They were identical only in appearance; in all other aspects, they were like night and day, and Demarco was most certainly the darkness of the two. They were both tall enough to intimidate, but not too tall as to stand out in a crowd. Their complexion was considered fair, almost like the color of a manila envelope.

Demonte favored freshly brushed waves in his hair, while his twin sported dreads that fell below the small of his muscular back. Demarco, was a solid 185 pounds at best after his stint in prison. He outweighed his brother by about fifteen pounds. The slightly heavier frame and dreads were the only way to distinguish the two.

Demarco loved to dress to impress, he never wore the same clothes twice. It was one-and-done, because to wear the same clothes more than once reminded Demarco of his poor childhood in the projects. When he and Demonte started hustling, it was nothing but designer gear with the footwear to match. His collection of apparel made it appear as if he owned a share in a clothing mall.

Demarco always looked every bit the roll of a gangster and he supported it with his attitude. He smoked expensive cigars, as well as partook in other extravagant pleasures. In fact, he loved money so much he felt everybody's money should be his. In his mind every dollar of a nickel bag of dope sold in Newark belonged to him.

Demarco was feared before ever going to prison. When he did get locked up, all the dope dealers in Newark celebrated his going away; so much so they all got together and threw a party at the Eleganza. The dealers even had the audacity to invite his brother to their little celebration. They wanted him there because he had a plug to the dope connect, some Africans from out of Harlem, New York. Plus, everybody knew that he was the easier of the two to deal with.

Demonte wasn't slow though, he was hip to their scheme. As he strolled through the Eleganza, he felt the eyes of all the haters beaming on the back of his neck. They all wanted the plug he had with the Africans—a connect they were never going to get. Aside from the many haters, however, most niggas in the club had mad love for Demonte because he was always about his business and was also able to recognize when a compromise was going to fatten up he and Demarco's pockets.

Tamir, even in his wheelchair, had been present when the dealers held their elaborate soiree. Another major hustler by the name of Royce was also in attendance, and Demonte came to an agreement with the both of them. The dealers he was cool with, he would front them his product on consignment. Their prices would be \$150.00 a brick and \$40,000 a kilo to hustle on their own blocks as long as they used his brand stamp which at the time was First Lady, and anyone not falling in that category had to see him personally.

It was a brilliant plan.

Demonte knew neither Tamir nor Royce would ever come up short with his money, because such a thing would ruin all other consignment deals for them or anyone else in the future. Demarco, on the other hand, while in a cell surrounded by steel bars and cement, did not see things the way his twin brother did.

*Our sister Donnise did the best she could. She busted her ass to take care of us, and Demonte is out there lending our product consignment. Nobody ever gave our sister a fuckin' dime. And, I'm not fronting a nigga shit when I get out there ... believe that,* he thought to himself.