

**PREVIEW**

"Murphy tells a powerful story of two boys in the neighborhoods of Boston at a time when the color of your skin was a boundary line. A MUST READ!"

—Kevin Chapman, Actor, Dorchester

# NEIGHBORHOOD LINES

**MICHAEL PATRICK MURPHY**



## PREFACE

**A**S A CHILD growing up I paid an extreme amount of attention to what was going on in the world. From the adults around me to society as a whole, the war between good and evil, politics, history, news, sports and the streets.

My grandmother born and raised in South Boston, was the wife of a Boston Irish Catholic who was a World War II Navy deep-sea diver that stormed the beach on D-Day. She never let a moment pass without loving, laughing, sharing countless stories of her Boston Irish-American culture, and talking about politics. I became intrigued with her stories of JFK, James Michael Curley (a.k.a “the mayor of the poor”), John McCormack, Cardinal Cushing and of course her father.

My great-grandfather and his political associates had all been “cut from the same cloth” as she would say. He was one of the many Boston Irish politicians during the first half of the 1900’s, who later became a superior court deputy sheriff at the statehouse. Legend has it that Mayor Curley had a few run-ins with the law, and so it was for his close associate my great-grandfather, Boston City Councilman Michael Mahoney. *(But they both would say “I d do it again!”).*

I originally wrote *Neighborhood Lines* back in 1997 while taking a college writing class. I set out to capture a period of time in Boston--between 1988 and 1995, tying in and intertwining the happenings of history throughout. Life was a rollercoaster at every turn as I had spent the past ten years getting an education on Morrissey Boulevard-- my high school and college years lived out in and around Dorchester, South Boston, and Boston. I spent many years working at various Boston union construction sites starting at the age of 14, gaining experiences that taught me a plethora of lessons for years to come. I remember feeling continually compelled and thinking to myself, "I have to write all this down".

Many incidents were fueled by racial feelings and fear during those years.

The imbedded, pre-established brain viruses and behavioral norms of the youth were clearly passed down through the realities, experiences, and truths of the adults within Boston's culture and society.

The two main characters of the story, Nate and Patrick, meet on each side of the racial lines, drawn by a newly implemented integration program at a longtime historic Boston Irish Catholic high school. The culture and society in which the students live, their ethnicities, families, and the neighborhoods of Boston are deeply portrayed throughout the tale. Tensions build between Nate and Patrick, as the relationship is continually challenged, limited, and inundated with interactions that bring waves of emotion—from love to hate, to fear, confusion, and anger.

With the increase of racial tension throughout America in the last several years, the urgency to publish *Neighborhood Lines* has been gnawing at me. The impact of the global political culture, terrorism, and random U.S. school, corporate and public shootings are brought right into our very homes, as the Internet has changed the world. In terms of information availability, the planet feels only a mile wide.

Life is changing so fast, I often find myself questioning: Are things worse now, or were they worse back then?

Some time in the late 90's, the landscape of Boston politics started to change for the better, and it was tangibly felt. Corruption was down, Whitey was gone, and the murder rate had dropped by fifty percent. The positive seeds of Mayor Flynn's policies had been taken over by a young Menino. He was making massive impacts, and major changes were taking place in the statehouse. Sports teams, businesses, unions, Cambridge, and Seaport—the last 20 years have been a great time to be alive in Boston! The time has gone by in a blink, and gentrification has been occurring to where certain areas of the city are now barely recognizable from the Boston I write about in *Neighborhood Lines*. The intent of telling this story of the past is to give voice to and shed light on the progress and lessons of race, power, and class—in hopes of bringing about continued, positive change in the future.

I have always strived to live, create, and write with passion. The experiences of my youth filled me with a strong desire to write about the stories of life, the different paths we take, and the people and crossroads we encounter along the way. Reflection of being a son and a father has impacted my soul in so many ways, life's endless lessons have no shortage of love, pain, accomplishments, and challenges. However, I now realize we often fail to see the abundance of the most amazing things in the present moment.

I hope this book makes you laugh, cry, ask important questions, and most of all *feel*. Breathe through your deepest wounds, darkest fears, and rawest of emotions. Allow your stories, culture, and life lessons to contribute to your greatness. May consciousness and awareness always be your guide to growth. Live in the present and focus on the now!

The process of bringing *Neighborhood Lines* to you has been so much fun. Stay tuned... there's more to come!



## CHAPTER 1

### Suffolk County Jail: May, 1991

**Y**O, WHERE YOU goin, Prospect?"

Prospect's heart thumped in his chest like it was trying to escape his body. A wave of jeers and snickers echoed down the hall as a couple dozen young men in orange jumpsuits watched the two guards march him past their cells.

It was impossible to know who had asked the question, as Prospect's eyes were swollen almost completely shut, courtesy of his latest pummeling. He was being removed from the general population again, not because he'd misbehaved, but because the guards feared for his life. He'd put on a brave face—a thug face, he told himself—after his arrest, using every last ounce of his energy to make himself appear fearless. But the minute he'd been processed and put inside, they'd been able to smell the fear all over him.

And one whiff was all it took.

Day one, he thought they might name him "Preacher" when they caught sight of his tattoo: Romans 12:19, which a few of the inmates had recognized as a Bible verse. But it hadn't stuck, probably because he was so young. By day three, they had settled on Prospect. By week two, his real name, along with his "real" life, already seemed

like a distant memory. For him, “Prospect” had now become bitterly ironic, a daily reminder of the death of his dreams. No matter who you were on the outside, in here, you started over at the bottom.

This was not how it was supposed to happen. He had had plans. Big plans. He was supposed to do more than anyone around him had ever accomplished. Now he wasn’t sure if he would live to make it out.



## CHAPTER 2

### Boston, September 1990

**N**ATE GRABBED THE brown paper bag off the counter where his mom always left it early in the morning before she went to work. He stuffed it in his backpack and ran out the door, but hesitated briefly on the steps of his apartment building.

The first day of junior year shouldn’t have been a big deal. Nate would have started getting more homework and taking what passed for college prep classes at Dorchester High School, while a lot of his old friends continued worrying their mothers by staying out all hours of the night and coming home covered with bruises and cuts. The fights were sometimes just the result of adolescent restlessness, more often they were the symptoms of Boston’s decade and a half social experiment with busing. Whites, blacks, Asians and Hispanics predictably stuck with and defended their own, no matter who they put in the desk next to you at school. You could integrate a social studies class, but the cafeteria remained as segregated as ever.

Nate’s mom had had endless conversations with him about avoiding fights and gangs and sticking to basketball and his studies. “We’ve got big plans for you, young man,” she always said. *We* meant

her and Nate's dad, even though for years the remains of his body had been buried under a cross in Arlington National Cemetery.

And then in May, the letter had come. Nate was leaving Dorchester. Headmaster Father Lydon had announced a new program at Cathedral High School to take a hundred black students from the surrounding area and enroll them, almost tuition free. Grades, test scores and teacher recommendations were considered. Nate's mother had wept when she found out he had gotten accepted.

Nate hadn't wanted to go. Too weird and unfamiliar. It wasn't the geographical distance of Cathedral from his tiny apartment in Dorchester where he had lived his entire life. It was the fact that the immense brick edifice inhabited a different universe, with its nuns and priests and rowdy Irish and Italian kids, passing notes and sneaking cigarettes between classes. Nate could walk down a street in his neighborhood, or in nearby Roxbury, every day for a week and count the number of whites he saw on one hand. Cathedral stood in the South End, a rare patch of neutral ground between the invisible lines that divided all the city's dozens of distinct enclaves from one another. Roxbury on one side, then Irish South Boston, and on the other side was the legendary Combat Zone and Chinatown.

Those were lines Nate had never planned to cross, until today.

A few miles away, Patrick's mother was yelling at him to hurry up. He grabbed his Pop-Tart™ and raced out of the house, his backpack over one shoulder.

"This is total bullshit," his mother muttered as she started the car. "I don't even know why we're bothering to send you here. You might as well go to Southie for free if they're letting n\*ggers into Cathedral." She took another drag off her cigarette, and Patrick thought she might cry.

"It's not that big of a deal, Ma," he offered, trying to calm her. The previous summer had been filled with almost nonstop adult chatter about the decision—rumored to have been funded by a handful of wealthy alums—to endow those extra scholarships. Father Lydon's explanation that the new students would take nothing away from the kids who were already there had done little to console them. True, Patrick's tuition was still mostly covered by a scholarship he received from the archdiocese. But it wasn't just about the money. "Look, Father Lydon explained it to me," he persisted. "They're just trying to give some of those underprivileged kids a chance."

"A chance? Are you kidding me? What about all the white kids from the projects in Old Colony and D Street? No one gave *them* a chance! No one gave *us* a chance, Paddy!" Ma was shaking with rage now, and Patrick was sorry he'd said anything. "Your great-great grandfather couldn't even get a job! No Irish Need Apply! Those signs were in every single window in the whole—"



"I know, Ma, I know!" Patrick interrupted, frustrated. "You've told me a million times."

"Then make it a million and one!" she snapped. "The point is, we had it just as bad as they did, but nobody lifted a finger to help us. We had to crawl up on our own, the rest of the world kicking us and

spitting on us the entire way, and that's what we did. No one gave us scholarships or held conferences to solve our problems! And now a couple assholes who went to Cathedral and made it big want to tell me that my boy has to go to school with n\*ggers?"

Patrick sighed. There was no use reasoning with her when she got like this. And he felt bad that they were paying money—even if it wasn't much—for him to go to Cathedral to avoid the chaos of the forcibly integrated public schools with their metal detectors and daily brawls. He wouldn't have cared if he went to Southie with his cousins and some of his other friends. But he liked Cathedral, and honestly, it was a hundred kids. What the hell was the big deal?

"Bye, Ma. Thanks for driving me," Patrick said, grabbing his backpack and slamming the door behind him and joining the swarm of students headed for the entrance. He was looking forward to his last year of high school, but had no idea what to expect from these new developments. "Slick!" he called out to a solidly built kid with dark, curly hair.

"Paddy! What up?" Slick called back, running over so they could enter the heavy double doors together. Inside, the halls buzzed with activity. Familiar figures greeted each other loudly, exchanging high fives and handshakes. Down the hall, just beyond a water fountain, Patrick saw four black students walking next to each other in complete silence.

"Senior year," Patrick sighed with satisfaction. "We're the big dogs now, man." The two boys found their new lockers and tried out the combinations that they had received in the mail. They had had lockers next to each other since ninth grade, since they were assigned alphabetically, but this time there was a locker between them.

"What the hell?" Slick asked, noticing the change.

"The new students," Patrick said, nodding at the locker that now

separated them. "You know, the black kids everyone's been bitching about all summer."

"But this is the senior section," Slick protested. "I heard they were only bringing in underclassmen. Who the hell would want to come to a new school just for a year, anyway?"

"Maybe they didn't have enough extra lockers in those sections," Patrick guessed. Another small crowd of black students passed them. They were holding cards and looking for their lockers. Patrick locked eyes with one of them, but neither of them said a word. "What do you have first period?" he asked, turning back to Slick.

As the two boys discussed their schedules, a black student arrived holding a card that matched the number of the locker between them.

"Can I help you?" Slick asked, blocking the locker with his thick body. The newcomer was taller by about four inches, with a lean, athletic build, and lighter by about 40 pounds.

"You wanna do this right here, on the first day?" the student asked, dropping his backpack and walking right up to Slick so his eyes were even with the new student's chin.

"Hey, be my guest," said Slick, thrown off by the new student's sudden intensity. He slid to the left to let him by. Patrick was impressed. Slick was a tough kid from Adams Corner in Dorchester, his parents were off the boat. He'd only seen Slick back down like that a couple of times. Once was freshman year when the two of them had been cornered by four angry upper classmen because of a joke they'd overheard Slick make. Patrick had been ready to fight—despite the near certainty of an ass whooping—but Slick had had the sense to apologize. Something in this student's demeanor had made Slick see sense again.

"Hey, don't mind this asshole," Patrick joked, motioning to Slick. "Patrick." He offered the newcomer his hand.

"Nate," Nate said, shaking Patrick's hand firmly.

"Sorry, dude," Slick laughed, "Just kidding around. Later, Paddy."

Slick nodded to Patrick and headed off to his English class on the other side of the building. The two boys assessed each other in silence.

“What’s your first class?” Patrick asked.

“Pre-calculus with O’Conner,” Nate answered matter-of-factly, shutting his locker and looking at his watch. The warning bell sounded. Boys up and down the hall began reflexively tucking their shirttails into their pants. Nate’s were already tucked in, and Patrick noticed his khaki uniform pants ironed so crisply the crease looked like the blade of an ax.

“Oh,” Patrick answered, surprised. “Same here. You’re only a junior, right?” He began walking toward Father O’Conner’s classroom and Nate followed.

“Yeah. That was part of why my mom really wanted me to come here. Dorchester was running out of math classes for me to take.”

“Gotcha,” Patrick said. “Well, classes are tough here, but I’m sure you’ll get used to it.” Nate stared at him a minute and then offered a nod and smile. Patrick couldn’t be sure, but the smile felt fake. Nate said nothing more as the two of them entered the classroom and took their seats.

### CHAPTER 3



THE CLASSROOM WAS already two thirds full when Patrick sat down at a desk toward the back. He saw Father O’Conner sitting at his desk in the front left corner, studying his notes; he had a friendly face with kind, blue eyes. The boys were whispering about how the police had already been called to Southie High School to investigate fresh vandalism—mostly standard, racial epithets that had appeared on one of the exterior walls before school even opened for the year. Everyone knew it was a waste of time to try to figure out who did it. In this town, there was no way anyone would break the code of silence and rat, whether the crime was murder or spray painting a racial slur on the side of the school.

Patrick watched Nate out of the corner of his eye as he took a seat in the second row and glanced around quickly. He was the only black student in the room. Nate imitated the rest of the boys as they dutifully put their hands together and bowed their heads, while Father Lydon’s voice recited the morning prayers over the loudspeaker. Then to everyone’s surprise, he continued to talk after the prayer was over.

“Now I know all our returning students are noticing some new faces around our hallways and in classrooms, in addition to our incoming freshmen. We are very excited about this new program

to build diversity here at Cathedral and at our sister school, MRM-Monsignor Ryan Memorial High School. We expect all of you to give our new students a warm welcome, and we look forward to what we will accomplish together this year.”

Father O’Conner moved to the front of the room, greeted the class and took attendance. “Welcome back, boys. We’re going to start with a little review,” Father began, holding his open textbook in one hand and using his other to write on the board. His voice was loud, but gentle. “If I have a function, the  $f$  of  $x$  which is defined as  $x$ -squared plus one, what is the graph of this function going to look like?”

A few of the boys groaned as the reality of the new school year set in. That was the thing about having math first period—no essays on “What I did over summer vacation.” Just back to work. While everyone else seemed to hesitate, Patrick’s hand shot up. Father O’Conner motioned for him to respond.

“It’s a parabola,” Patrick answered confidently, laughing off the friendly jabs from his classmates, who were teasing him for being a teacher’s pet.

“And where would the vertex be?” Father asked him.

“Zero, one,” Patrick answered. More jabs, but Patrick didn’t care. He liked math, even if he didn’t always get A’s. It sure beat reading boring literature or suffering through Spanish vocabulary quizzes.

Father nodded approvingly and asked, “Now who can tell me what the inverse function of the  $f$  of  $x$  would look like?”

The room was silent, except for the rustling of papers and the sound of students squirming in chairs. Patrick couldn’t think of the answer. He remembered that they had learned about inverses last year. Something about flipping the  $x$  and the  $y$ . But he was drawing a blank on how to do it.

Slowly, Nate raised his hand. Father nodded for him to speak.

“There is no inverse function,” Nate responded quietly. The room stayed silent as everyone watched Father O’Conner expectantly.

“That’s right,” Father answered. “And why is that?”

Nate answered, “Because if there are two  $x$  values for every  $y$  in the current function, then the inverse will yield two  $y$  values for every  $x$ . Any equation that does not yield a unique  $y$  value for every  $x$  in the domain is, by definition, not a function.”

“Very good!” Father O’Conner answered, smiling with approval. “I couldn’t have said it better myself. We’ll talk a little later about restricting the range of the function, but let’s move on for now.” He wrote several more problems on the board, while the boys whispered and copied them down. Patrick was more than a little surprised. Everything he had heard about Dorchester High School made him think that it was a zoo, full of rowdy students who fought constantly and learned nothing all day. He stared at the back of Nate’s neatly trimmed head, wondering how he could have possibly been able to answer the question so confidently.

First period ended and the rest of the day went much as Patrick would have expected. There were ten black students in his Physical Education class, but no one in the rest of his academic classes. He figured this was because his classes were almost exclusively with seniors, and no black seniors had been admitted. Nate being in his math class was clearly the exception to the rule.

He saw Nate again at the end of the day when he went to his locker.

“Good first day?” Patrick asked, dumping his books in his locker and slamming the door.

“No complaints,” Nate said matter-of-factly. “You?”

“Oh, it was good,” answered Patrick. “You know, senior year. One more year, and then college and all that.”

“Oh.” There was the faintest hint of surprise in Nate’s voice. “Where are you trying to go?”

“Not sure yet,” Patrick answered, caught a little off guard. He had had vague discussions with his mother and grandmother about college plans over the summer. They had talked about Boston College,

Boston University and Northeastern, but he couldn't remember what school they had actually decided on. All he knew was he was going.

"Well, it's good to apply to a lot of places, so then you have options," Nate said. Again that confidence—the same he had shown when he answered the question in math class. Patrick didn't know how to respond.

"Right," he answered. "Well, see you tomorrow."

"See ya," Nate called, shutting his locker and slinging his backpack over his shoulder. Patrick made his way toward the exit, when he caught sight of Father Lydon in the hall.

"Hey there, Patrick!" Father Lydon called out to him. "You in a rush to get home?"

"No, Father," Patrick responded warmly. Even when he had complained about the uniform, the extra homework, the strict priests, the lack of girls in his classes and all the other things that made Cathedral different from Southie, he had always liked Father Lydon. He was a Southie guy, born and raised. Even as a little boy sitting in Mass or practicing for his First Communion, Patrick had laughed at his jokes and found comfort in his gentle but frank demeanor. It had also been clear that Father Lydon looked out for him, especially after Patrick's father disappeared ten years ago. This might have made him or his mom uncomfortable if he'd been one of those priests who always seemed to be paying special attention to certain boys. But Father Lydon had always been above board in that regard.

"Come into my office and chat for a minute," Father said, motioning him to follow. Patrick obeyed, walking behind him until they reached his office. It wasn't a large room, but it was full of books. Behind the desk—which was covered with several of stacks of papers, a bulky computer monitor and keyboard in the corner—hung a large Celtic cross. Patrick took a seat in one of the two armchairs facing the desk.

"So how was the first day of your senior year, Patrick?" the priest asked, sitting down in the large chair under the cross.

"Good," Patrick answered. "It's nice to finally be on top, ya know?"

"Sure, sure," he agreed. "It's your turn to be in charge, it's true. How do you think the new students are fitting in?"

Patrick thought for a moment. "Well, it's hard for me to say. I met one of them today. And there were some in my PE class. Things seem to be going well, I guess." Patrick knew they were both thinking about the busing riots during the 1970s in response to the coerced integration of Boston's public school system—a move that forced many students, black and white, to attend schools far from their own neighborhood. There had been endless protests, and white teenagers had beaten up a prominent black lawyer outside City Hall in 1976.



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Then (as Patrick's mom never stopped reminding him), black teenagers had retaliated by throwing rocks at a white mechanic. Outbursts of racial violence had continued since—including riots his mother had seen just blocks away from their house by the Old Colony

projects—although things had seemed calmer of late. As of 1988 this resulted in many unhappy parents and residents as South Boston High School had a 37% black, 24% Hispanic, and a 27% white student ratio.

Busing was one thing, but recently this young black woman attorney from Dorchester, Wilkerson, representing the Boston NAACP, had just won a class action lawsuit. She took on the Boston Housing Authority for discrimination of public housing placement and violation of the Fair Housing Act of 1968. So the city had just begun integrating the all-white housing projects throughout South Boston and Charlestown. This just stirred up the neighborhood and the city all over again.



1988 WGBH News Report on Discrimination Lawsuit against Boston Housing Authority regarding integration of Housing projects.

Patrick thought back to the tense conversations between neighborhood adults all summer. He knew Cathedral's decision to integrate could cause the streets to explode again.



Boston Police officers flip a police cruiser back over after it was overturned by a crowd during a disturbance at South Boston High School on Dec. 11, 1974. A clash between the police and a crowd of 1500 people outside the school after a student was stabbed inside led to the closing of seven public schools in South Boston and Roxbury for the remainder of the week.



“Like I told you over the summer, I understand your mom and some of the other parents are pretty upset about this program,” Father Lydon said, a hint of sadness in his voice.

“Well, yeah,” Patrick admitted, shifting a little in his seat. “I mean, you know Ma. She just thinks all the new kids are bad news.”

“I can understand that,” Father Lydon, nodding. “Parents always want what’s best for their children, particularly what feels the safest. And these are frightening times for people like your mom. Our city is changing.”

“What do you mean?” Patrick asked. Ma was constantly saying Boston was changing too, but he had always assumed that older people just liked to complain that things were better when they were young.

“This is not the same city your mother grew up in. When she was a young girl, we Irish were the undisputed rulers of Boston. But that’s not the case anymore.” Patrick nodded and Father Lydon continued, “We’ve been here a long time, but we haven’t been here forever. We came mostly in the middle of the 1800s. You’ve heard about that?”

“Sure,” Patrick answered. Even Patrick’s friends who had no idea where Ireland was had heard of the potato famine that brought hundreds of thousands of Irish to America.

“Yes, of course you do,” Father Lydon said, smiling. “We came by the boatload, and honestly, no one was excited to have us. All of Boston was a wealthy, cultured city back then, and no one wanted a bunch of drunken Irish bastards stealing from their stores, cat-calling their women and fighting in their streets, you know what I mean?”

Patrick laughed and nodded in agreement. He knew the history of Boston well, his grandmother told stories of the family emigration from Ireland all of the time. She grew up in the ‘30s and ‘40s, so she held different views than her daughter. She loved the Kennedy’s with a passion. Bobby was her favorite, but she would always refer

to JFK’s book, *A Nation of Immigrants* regarding her father’s arrival by boat in the Boston Harbor. She was proud of how her father had come over with a friend named Michael J. Quill. They had met as teenagers as members of an IRA Scout group. Quill had set up in New York and fought for human rights, started unions, and became friendly with Bobby Kennedy and MLK. She recalled Quill’s words when referring to blacks, Jews, and racial equality: “We all arrived by boat, we eat different foods, sing and dance to different songs, however we do not have to love them or marry them, but we must respect and stand united with them for the good of us all.” MLK said, “Quill was a man who spent his life ripping the chains of bondage off his fellow man. He sees people, not races”. Patrick loved listening to her. She would always read the daily newspaper and tell him stories of the shenanigans and corruption of the past. Organized crime and politics always walked a thin, intertwined line in this city, she would say.

“But we kept coming and we wouldn’t leave. We got married, and we had kids, and our kids got married and had kids and soon we had replaced a lot of the original people who lived here. There are some who say we colonized this city. Others say we invaded it. And for generations and generations—as long as people like your mother and your grandmother can remember—it’s been ours. Do you see?”

“Sure,” Patrick answered. He understood that part. The Celtic crosses displayed everywhere, the massive St. Patrick’s Day Parade, even the multiple graffiti tributes to the IRA. Boston—South Boston anyway—was an Irish town through and through.

“But that’s changing, Patrick. It’s not changing because of the blacks any more than it’s changing because of the Hispanics or the Chinese. Cities change. That’s just how it goes. And change scares us the same way we scared the people who were here before we were.”



“And like they scared the American Indians when they came?” Patrick asked with a smirk.

“Ha! Good point. That was a little more complicated, wasn’t it? But you’ve got the idea. My job as headmaster is to make sure that this school serves our parish, and our parish is changing. Remember, we of the Society of Jesus are Men for Others, and we need young men like you who are willing to live that out. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

“I do,” Patrick nodded. Change was inevitable, he thought, but that didn’t mean it had to be bad.

## CHAPTER 4



**N**ATE TOSSED HIS backpack down on the couch and went to the kitchen. The entire apartment was little more than a room, with a tiny kitchen in one corner, a table and four chairs in another. A medium-sized window with a radiator under it overlooked the busy street below. The couch, facing the opposite wall, served to set off the living room, which had a rocking chair, a coffee table with an open Bible and a tiny television on a stand in the far corner. On top the TV was a framed photograph of a stern-faced, handsome man in a military uniform.

Nate poured himself a glass of milk and pulled out the large jar of peanut butter to make a sandwich on the wheat bread his mother insisted on buying instead of white. There were days when he thought he might prefer to go hungry rather than eat another peanut butter sandwich, but today was not one of them.

He picked up the phone on the wall and dialed a number.

“Can you tell Carmella that Nate is home?” he asked into the receiver.

Nate hung up the phone and sighed. He looked briefly across the living room at the TV, but no matter how much he wanted to turn

it on he knew he couldn't. Besides the photograph staring at him, the meticulously clean apartment was a constant reminder of his mother's presence, even when she was away at work. Which she was for at least thirteen hours most days.

Nate sat down at the table and opened a large SAT prep book. He glanced at the clock above the door and began to work through some of the math practice problems. They were not difficult—mostly algebra 1 and geometry—but Mom was right. You forgot how to do even the simplest problems if you didn't practice.

The outside noise—cars, children playing, adults yelling and music from the occasional boom box—drifted up from the street, despite the closed windows. Nate was used to it; complete silence would have felt strange. He glanced up at the clock; 27 minutes had passed, which he decided was close enough to 30. He switched to the verbal section of the prep book, drilling himself on vocabulary words, analogies, and working through a reading comprehension passage. Finally the hour was over.

Nate closed the prep book, leaving his scrap paper out for evidence in case his mother returned home before he came back in. They had made an agreement at Christmas. An hour a day, five days a week, of SAT prep, until he took the test in October. If he did well enough, he would be done. If he needed to improve his score, they'd renegotiate. Basketball was plan A, but you never knew. You could break an ankle, miss a season. Plus, your brain would be with you for the rest of your life.

He rose from the table and walked through the tiny hallway with its three doors: the bathroom, and the two bedrooms, each barely big enough to hold a twin bed and a dresser. He entered the left one and retrieved his basketball from the side of his neatly made bed. Another Mom rule. Beds had to be made military style. Daddy

was watching from heaven, she would joke, and he couldn't abide a messy bed.

Nate left his apartment, locked the door and ran down the stairs onto the street. He knew his mother would prefer he stay inside. Like many black mothers, she struggled constantly to balance her son's need for fresh air with his need to not be hassled by gangbangers or shot accidentally in random crossfire. Nate worried less than she did. Dorchester and Roxbury were dangerous, but from what he had seen on the news about Los Angeles, things were even worse out there.

Nate's apartment building was four blocks from a small public park. As he walked, he nodded to his friend Rodney across the street, who nodded back as he barely touched the hand of a passing stranger. Nate knew it was a drug handoff. Rodney had recently started pushing for Castle Gate, which controlled a twelve-block radius, the second largest territory in Boston next to Whitey Bulger's crew and the almost mythological "Winter Hill Gang," so named by the *Boston Herald*.

Whitey had been slowly gaining the control of the city since he was a kid in the Southie projects and his return from his incarceration at Alcatraz in the mid '60s. And his crew was on another level. They dealt in a little of everything: gambling, extortion, loan sharking, kidnapping and drugs, and they had politicians—Whitey's brother Billy Bulger was the president of the Massachusetts Senate—cops and (some said) even the FBI in their pockets. Castle Gate was strictly crack, in that their closest competition was a fledgling Hispanic gang called the X-Men.

"Hey, you seen Tre?" An enormous man with a red, white and blue hoodie had sidled up silently and was practically on top of Nate. He looked familiar, but Nate couldn't place him.

"Naw, man," Nate said without flinching. The man nodded and kept walking. Tre was Nate's cousin, and Nate's answer had been true. He hadn't seen him in several days.

Although most kids in Nate's neighborhood felt pressured to join up with a gang at some point, everyone seemed to leave Nate alone. Partially it was because of his basketball skill, he had been the star point guard at Dorchester. Partially, it was because most people were terrified of his mother.

He thought about the first day at his new school, and especially about his math teacher, Father O'Conner, with his pale, sun-spotted face. How old was he? White people always ended up being younger than you thought they should be. Father O'Conner's blue eyes had had a tiny rim of pink around them; they reminded Nate of his friend's rabbit that had run away years ago. He shuddered and put the thought out of his mind.

Familiar graffiti marked the brick buildings he passed along his way, lots of Castle Gate signs, as well as the boilerplate black power fists. Frayed posters of New Edition—the most famous band to ever come out of Roxbury—adorned many of the windows, even though Bobby Brown was trying to go solo now. Nate paused for a moment, dribbling his ball in place when he noticed what looked like a fresh marking on the side of the Laundromat. "Norfolk Kings" was written in black and gray bubble letters. Nate stared uncomprehendingly for a moment and then moved on until he reached the park.

The park was little more than a large empty lot, half of which was dirt spotted with patches of grass, the other half was covered with cracked pavement. Every winter, the cracks grew with the freezing and thawing of the ice, until now you could sprain your ankle in one of them if you weren't careful. The grassy side supported a creaking swing set and a jungle gym, while the paved section had a basketball hoop with a rusty chain-link net at each end. There were a few children on the jungle gym and swings and small crowd of young men playing a disorganized game of ball on the pavement.



Nate motioned a greeting to the boys playing ball and moved to the far corner of the pavement. Quietly and methodically, he began his drills. Dribbling quickly with his right hand for about ten minutes, then with his left for even longer. Then between the legs. Then crossing over and all the different combinations he had learned at the summer camp his mother had saved to send him to. Then he was ready for his shooting drills.

Slugs, a huge figure who always reminded Nate of the titular character in the "Fat Albert" cartoon, saw him finish and called out, "You need the hoop, MJ?"

"Finish your game, Cuz" Nate called back. Slugs was Tre's younger brother. Slugs had always been the more lighthearted of the two, although neither had been the same since their older brother Troy died three years ago.

"Nah, we done," Slugs insisted. "C'mon kids. Make way for MJ. He gonna play for the Celtics one day and buy us all Jordans, right MJ?"

"We'll see," Nate laughed. "Just tryin to play in college somewhere right now." The rest of the crowd retreated to the other hoop while Nate did his shooting drills. Some played half court, but many stopped to watch him. Nate felt the pressure of their eyes. Inside he knew that they were counting on him, in a way. He was the brainy act. The player with potential. He was the one who was destined to get out. Lots of kids got hassled for doing well in school or talking about college in anything but derisive terms. Nate was not entirely sure why they let him off the hook, but he guessed it was because he treated them with respect, because his cousin Slugs was the biggest kid on the street, and because they probably hoped he could take them with him somehow.

Nate finished his shooting drills and played pick-up with rest of the crew until the sun told him that his mom would be home any second. Then—as he would do every day until it got too dark to go out—he said goodbye to everyone and began to walk home. As he retraced his steps, he saw two uniformed police officers—one white and one black. He did not make eye contact, but as he passed them, the white officer called out to him.

"Yo, you pushing for Castle Gate out here?"

"No, officer," Nate said, meeting the officer's gaze and then looking down. His tone was even and polite, just as his mother had made him swear it would be in these situations.

"You sure about that?" the white officer demanded, taking two steps toward him.

"Yes, sir," Nate replied, using all his willpower to resist the urge to tell the officer to leave him the hell alone.

"I don't know, Isaac," the white cop said, shaking his head. "Let's check him out." Obediently, Nate followed the officer's instruction to turn toward the wall of the nearby building, putting his basketball down and spreading his hands and feet. The officer shoved him into

wall, and then his hands went up and down Nate's legs, stopping an uncomfortably long time around his groin. Then he went into his pockets, up and down his torso, up and down his arms. He could feel and smell the cop's nasty breath on his neck, but Nate willed his breathing to stay calm, willed his body not to shake, willed himself not to shed a tear at his humiliation. He knew they probably had him confused with Rodney again; they were similar height and build. He also knew that they could easily plant a vial or two on him if he gave them attitude. So he did as he was told.

When the cop was done, Nate picked up his basketball, and waited to be dismissed.

"You have a good day, kid," the white cop said. The black cop said nothing. Nate walked the rest of the way home, taking deep breaths so his mother wouldn't see the incident written on his face. When he unlocked the apartment door, he smelled that dinner was already in the oven. She must have gotten home a little early, he thought.

"How's my Cathedral High School student?" Mom called out, rushing to give him a hug.

"Fine," Nate answered, receiving her embrace. She squeezed him tight and stood on her toes to kiss him on the neck. As always, she seemed reluctant to let him go, as if this hug might be their last. "I stink, Mom," he laughed, freeing himself from her grasp.

"I know, but you're still my baby," she insisted. "Go shower real quick. The chicken will be another few minutes."

Nate obeyed with a sigh. Life with Mom was highly regulated and seldom varied. He almost always cooperated. But sometimes, the four walls of the apartment felt like they were closing in on him, and he wanted to scream. In those moments, he wanted more than anything to break free from Mom's endless rules, run outside and do something truly impulsive and reckless: mouth off at a cop, chill with Rodney doing whatever he did at night, or just stay out at the

court past dark. Then he would hear a siren or a car backfiring that sounded like it could be a gunshot, and he would return to reality. Mom was right. He had to play by all the rules; there was no margin of error for a kid like him.

Nate emerged from the shower and sat down at the table. His mom had already filled his plate with chicken, mashed potatoes and about a third more vegetables than he felt like eating. She always seemed to serve steamed broccoli these days, he noticed, saving her collards stewed with ham hock for special occasions.

Mom sat down and said grace. The two of them began to eat and discuss their days. Nate diligently answered all her questions about his school day, from the details of Father O'Conner's class to whether or not his uniform was comfortable. Then it was Nate's turn.

"How was work?"

"Oh, you know. The same," she answered, smiling. Nate knew Mom didn't like talking about work because she didn't want him feeling guilty. What was there to say about working 60 hours a week cleaning hotel rooms for minimum wage? She economized, stretching every dollar impossibly far. Of course she made sure he had the shoes he needed for basketball, and he knew she had some money put away. He also knew to conceal it, in case relatives came asking, which they always did.

"How about your class?" he asked. Nate's mom had been taking Saturday classes to get her teaching certification for what felt like forever. It wasn't easy when you could only do one class at a time, but he had never once heard her complain.

"It's going real well," she smiled, and then corrected herself. "Really well, I mean. I like this teacher. She knows how to explain things so you can understand them, you know? Now, when are basketball tryouts at Cathedral?"

"Not til November," Nate laughed. "It's football season now, Mom. You know that."

"The coach already knows about you, though, right?"

Nate shrugged. "Maybe. It's not a big deal. They're a smaller school, but their team did pretty well last year."

"Well, I'm sure he knows who you are. We just need to trust the Lord that you won't get hurt this season. Did you see Alvin and Tremont while you were out? Aunt Carol is worried they're getting mixed up with some bad kids."

"Just Alvin," Nate answered. Alvin was Slugs' real name. "Tre wasn't around. Alvin didn't look any different to me. I mean, they both act all hard, but they sure aren't with Castle Gate or anything like that. Aren't too many other real players around here, as far as I can tell." That answer seemed to satisfy his mom.

Nate finished his food. It tasted fine, as it always did, but like the peanut butter sandwich from earlier, there was something almost unbearably monotonous about it. Sometimes, the thought of living in Dorchester for another two years filled him with unbearable frustration. Other times, the thought of being anywhere else terrified him. Every time, he reminded himself that it didn't matter what he felt. He would get out. No one else in his family had gotten out yet, but he would.

"Mom," he said almost timidly after he had helped her clear and wash the dishes. "I only have a short paragraph to write for English and ten review problems for math. After I'm done, can I watch TV?"

She turned to him and sighed. "Just this once, and just for half an hour."

"Yes, ma'am," he smiled. And hurried to open his backpack and finish his homework.

## CHAPTER 5



**P**ATRICK TURNED ONTO his block and paused before walking up the steps of the duplex where he had lived since he was born. His street was full of modest homes that were built to hold anywhere from one to three families. Some had been renovated to keep up with the times, while others had fallen into various states of disrepair. Many dated all the way back to the late 1800s, when industrial workers and their families flooded into South Boston.

Around that time, the Boston streetcar service had been extended to the southern and eastern shores. This had made it easier for everyone to get around, but it had also brought the Polish and the Italians, who began to settle close to the already established Irish enclaves. No matter how hard you fought for something, there was always someone waiting to take it from you.

Patrick looked across the street and saw a girl walking up the steps of a single family home. Her strawberry blonde hair fell in ringlets over the starched uniform that barely hid the enticing curves of her body. Patrick wanted to call out to her, but restrained himself. He caught her eye, though, and she paused and waved to him. He had already decided to ask Kiley to the homecoming dance next month,

and now he wondered if he could take her to the movies before then without Slick, PJ and the other boys giving him shit about it.

Patrick's relationship with Kiley had an oddly innocent quality to it. They'd lived across the street from each other for their entire lives. Kiley was two years younger, so Patrick—who'd had his share of semi-serious girlfriends over the years—had only begun to notice her about a year ago. This past summer, with its warm nights and late mornings, things had gone further. First kisses stolen at dusk, then a little more. Kiley's parents were strict, so it was all secret. But of course that only made it more exciting.

Patrick pushed open the door, which they never bothered to lock. The main floor of his house contained four rooms arranged around a staircase: the formal living room (which no one sat in) and the family room were in the front. The formal dining room (where no one ate) and the eat-in kitchen were in the back. The family room opened into the kitchen, so you could see the TV if you sat in the right seat at the table. Patrick stepped onto the shag carpet that covered the family room. The soft brown couch and chairs were beginning to wear, and the table—some sort of engineered wood with brass colored accents—was scratched and dented.

He had vague memories of this family room furniture set when it was brand new, his dad unloading it proudly from his truck and warning Patrick not to put his feet up on the table. Back then, payday brought surprise purchases occasionally. Other times it brought incessant arguments between his parents, complete with the smashed plates and broken bottles.

The weirdest thing about his dad disappearing had been that their day-to-day lives hadn't changed that much. If anything, life was more peaceful with Dad gone, and Patrick's sisters were too young to remember him being around at all. Patrick used to imagine that his dad was doing something secret—fighting for the IRA, maybe—and

would return home when the time was right. But now he just tried not to think about him at all.

On the wall above the fireplace hung a picture of John F. Kennedy, thirty-fifth president of the United States, looking serene, handsome and eternally youthful. The portrait reminded Patrick that anything was possible, as long as you didn't give up on your dream. Before Kennedy, everyone had said there would never be a Catholic president, and certainly not an Irish Catholic. But he had proven them all wrong.

The Kennedys, Ma would remind him, were not any better than anybody else when they got started. Joe had been smart with money, investing in all sorts of things, and had amassed a fortune. Then he had thrown himself into his sons' political careers, and Jack had made it all the way to the top. An Irish kid from Boston, just like him.

Patrick had what it took to do the same, Ma would always remind him. He could be a state senator like Billy Bulger, or a congressman, or the current mayor of Boston, Ray Flynn, another born and raised South Boston guy. The sky was the limit. You just had to believe in yourself and not give up.



Mayor Ray Flynn and Senator Billy Bulger

Patrick ran upstairs, changed out of his uniform, and returned to the living room to turn on the TV. Ma's shift at the hospital was over at 7:00, so she wouldn't be home for a few hours. Everyone loved it when she worked late, since that meant unlimited TV, and McGoo's pizza for dinner. About ten minutes later, he heard the screen door rattle. His sisters were in sixth and seventh grade, they wouldn't be home until 4:00. He turned his head to the door and saw his younger cousin PJ.

"Yo, Paddy! What up?" PJ laughed. Patrick immediately noticed that his cousin was sporting a freshly blackened eye. PJ was slightly built, but strong; he was always smiling and never seemed to have a care in the world.

"What the hell happened to you?" Patrick asked. "It's only the first damn day!" PJ had always been a nice kid, but he could be too impulsive for his own good sometimes.

"This?" PJ laughed, pointing to the eye. "Nothing man. Some n\*gger tried to step to me over my new kicks. He got a punch in before I threw him in a locker. Pretty nice though, right?" PJ motioned to his shoes. They were brand new Air Jordans.

"Jeez, where'd you get those?" Patrick asked. Patrick's mom was a nurse, so they could afford some luxuries now and then. But PJ's mom worked at the local convenience store part time and his dad was retired, although no one seemed to know exactly what job he had retired from.

"Oh a friend hooked me up," PJ said dismissively. "No big deal."

"Don't be stupid, PJ," Patrick warned seriously, wondering what friend PJ had that he didn't know. "Don't get yourself killed over some damn shoes."

"Well, what should I've done?" PJ asked almost innocently. "Just let the n\*gger take em?"

"You know at least half those guys are packin. And definitely

don't jump on the Ashmont train wearing those Jordans," Patrick suggested shaking his head. Just last week, gunshots had rung out at a subway stop, leaving three dead and six wounded. But PJ always seemed oblivious to danger. He looked at life as one long, hilarious joke, which made him fun to hang out with, but didn't necessarily bode well for his future.

"Ya gotta live a little Cuz," PJ laughed. "Carp-pay whatever. Remember that movie? Or from English class or something?"

"*Carpe diem*," Patrick explained. "It means seize the day. From *Dead Poet's Society*."

"Right! See, that's why you're going to be President one day, and then you can get me any job I want!" PJ laughed at the thought.

"Yeah right," Patrick laughed. He didn't really want to be president, but he did want to be something. There were days when high school had felt like it was lasting forever, and real life would never get started. But now that senior year had finally come, he had a gnawing feeling that there were some concrete things that needed to happen. Nate's comments about applying to lots of different colleges had reminded him that he would need to get started on that soon.

"You'll be something great, you'll see," PJ said confidently, switching the TV channel without asking. "So what's it like with n\*ggers at your school now?"

"Can't really say," Patrick said. "Just one in my math class and a bunch in PE. I'm in all senior classes anyway, and they were all underclassmen."

"Well, that's good, huh? I guess they won't make much trouble in Catholic school," PJ speculated. After his mother's reaction that morning, Patrick saw no point in trying to share Father Lydon's wisdom about Boston changing, or suggest that maybe not all conflicts between the blacks and whites were started by blacks. The city had seen plenty of racial violence, and there was plenty of blame to

go around. But PJ, like most of Patrick's friends, didn't necessarily see it that way.

The two sat in silence watching a rerun of "The A-Team", and PJ began to doze off. When the episode ended, Patrick heard the screen door open and shut; Shannon and Danielle had returned from school, their uniforms wrinkled but clean. Shannon ran up to PJ and hugged him, while Danielle, who saw herself as grown up now, merely acknowledged her brother and cousin and pulled an issue of *Seventeen Magazine* out of her of backpack.

"We get the TV first," Danielle informed him, switching the channel.

"Whatever," Patrick said. He and PJ vacated the living room and sat down at the kitchen table where they opened a bag of Doritos. A few minutes later the screen door rattled again.

"Hey, hey, how's everybody doing today?" Patrick would recognize Sean's almost comically loud voice anywhere. Sean was short—still just five foot six or so—but he was broad shouldered and worked hard to make sure his biceps bulged in his tight tee shirts. He was carrying a six-pack of Milwaukee's Best, and Patrick saw Walsh—lanky like PJ, but not nearly as strong—trailing close behind. Walsh was a senior at Southie with PJ. Sean had graduated two years ago, and worked part time as a busboy at The Quiet Man on West Broadway.

"Nice to see you lovely folks," Walsh said, tossing a Red Sox cap at PJ, which he must have left at school.

"Thanks, Ma," PJ joked, catching it and placing it on his head backwards. He never was very good at keeping track of his stuff.

"Hey, make sure that shit is out of my house before Ma gets home," Patrick cautioned them, motioning to the beer.

"Oh, we'll be gone long before Kathy gets back, trust me," Sean laughed. "The girls get the TV? Seriously?" he asked motioning toward the living room.

"Let them finish this episode. Then you can switch it," Walsh said reasonably. Sean rolled his eyes and opened a beer, the others did the same.

"No fair," Shannon protested from the other room.

"Be quiet, and I'll let you play with my Gameboy," Patrick offered. The four boys had known each other since birth. Walsh and PJ had brothers and sisters, but Sean was an only child and never understood how to negotiate for things. Except for Patrick going to Catholic school, they had spent most of their waking moments together, throwing rocks and playing stickball when they were little; more recently, playing basketball and street hockey.

"Full House" ended on TV, and the girls retrieved the Gameboy and went upstairs. The boys moved to the living room. Sean and PJ both lit cigarettes, as Sean opened a second beer. They watched "Yo MTV Raps" for a while, cracking jokes and complaining about school. At 5:00, Sean rose to go. He was cutting it close for the dinner shift as it was. Everyone else got ready to head down the park.

"Yo, PJ, you gonna help me out this weekend?" Sean asked on his way out the door. Patrick's ears pricked up, but he said nothing.

"Yeah, I got it. No problem," PJ answered without looking up from the TV. Patrick wondered what it was about, but didn't ask.

"Alright, then," Sean said approvingly. "Later, boys." The screen door clattered as he left.



## CHAPTER 6

SEPTEMBER WENT BY faster than Nate thought it would. He adjusted to his new routine without much trouble, spending each weekday afternoon with his prep book, his basketball and his homework. Before he knew it, he was walking home from Dorchester High School on a sunny Saturday in mid-October.

“How did it go?” Mom’s voice was bubbling over with excitement and anxiety as he came through the door.

“I think it went well. Pretty much what I expected. You know, it’s definitely going to get cold tonight.” Nate replied, trying to reassure her and change the subject at the same time. He wasn’t lying. It had gone well. He had finished every section early and gone back and checked his work. He was confident about all but a small handful of the math questions and one or two of the verbal. And while he didn’t share his mother’s obsession with this test, he certainly hoped he did well enough to avoid taking it again.

“Well, good,” she said, hugging him tight and kissing him on the cheek as she did every time he came in the apartment. “But if you’re not happy with either score, you can take it again, you know. That’s

why you're taking it now, so you still have time to raise your score before you apply—"

"I know, Mom," Nate interrupted, trying to be patient. They had literally had this same discussion dozens of times over the past year and a half.

"What about tonight?" Mom asked.

"I'm going I guess," Nate sighed, the ambivalence in his voice obvious. "Derek and Andre are going, and Betina and the other girls from MRM will be there."

"Okay, that's fine," Mom agreed. "But be back by 11:30 and remember, if the cops catch you with troublemakers—"

"I know, Mom," Nate interrupted. "I know. They won't care if I'm guilty or not. Young black men get locked up or shot just for being in the wrong place at the wrong time." He repeated the last two sentences robotically.

"Look," Mom said almost apologetically, "I know you're sick of hearing it. I know I sound like a broken record. But you have to understand, you have no room for mistakes, son. White kids can mess up all they want, and their parents can hire fancy lawyers to get them out of it. You so much as stand downwind from someone messing up, and it's over for you. That's just how the world works, understand?"

"Yes, ma'am," Nate said dutifully.

"Hey, have fun at the dance, Nate," Mom smiled. "Just remember that other thing I always tell you."

"Don't worry, Mom," Nate laughed. "You know I'm not gonna mess with no white girl."

Patrick tried to push the morning's activities out of his mind and focus on his last homecoming dance in just a few hours. It was his first time taking the SAT and he had not known at all what to expect. He knew most of the math, but had been confused by the way the problems were set up. The rest of the questions had seemed weird and by the last two sections, he was just ready for it all to be over.

But he had been anticipating tonight for a long time. He was borrowing his mom's car, and he would be taking Kiley. The more he rolled it over in his mind, the more he was confident tonight was going to be the night. As far as Slick, PJ and everyone else were concerned, he and Kiley had been at it since summer. But in reality, Patrick hadn't wanted to rush her. She was younger and genuinely innocent. She was also more special to him than his previous girlfriends, most of whom had been older and more than happy to show him the ropes. So he'd been patient, and tonight he was pretty sure it would pay off.

Kiley met him out front. Between the dress—a pink gown with cap sleeves and sweetheart neckline that Patrick guessed would just barely get by the nuns enforcing the dress code—the makeup, and her mother's string of pearls around her neck, she had aged two years. Patrick wanted to kiss her right there, but he knew how girls could be when they spent all that time on their makeup. Instead, he whispered that she looked great, yelled goodbye to his mother and sisters and the two departed in the family's 1985 Ford Taurus.

The ride was short, and they were both pretty quiet. When they got to the school, the lights in the gym had been lowered and "Roni" pumped loudly from the speakers. A handful of nuns were circulating inside, making sure that couples didn't get too close, but most were experts at evading their glances. After they danced together to LL Cool J's "I Need Love", Kiley found some of her friends from MRM and Patrick located Slick near the back door.

"Where's everyone at?" Patrick asked him.

"Outside already," Slick nodded toward the door. As usual, some boys had gone out back to sneak beer and smoke cigarettes and blunts. Patrick planned to join them for a beer or two in a while, but not just yet. Slick continued, "So now our homecoming looks just like Southie's, huh?"

Patrick said nothing, but as his eyes scanned the gym he saw the crowd was dotted with black couples. Well of course it was, he thought. They go to school here now; what's the big deal? He noticed Nate dancing with a slender, bronze-skinned girl. She was average height, Patrick guessed, but she looked short dancing with Nate. When the song finished, the girl and a few of her friends congregated in the far corner. Patrick and Nate acknowledged one another with a nod.

To Patrick's surprise, Nate walked in their direction instead of joining the black kids on the other side of the gym. Then he saw Nate squat down and pick up a hair bow that must have fallen out of his date's hair and been kicked to the side of the gym by accident.

"That your girl's?" Patrick inquired, looking at the bow.

"Something like that," Nate admitted with slight grin. "We've been knowing each other since grade school, you know? You here with that girl in pink?"

"Yeah, same deal," Patrick laughed. "You getting bored? Some boys got some cases and a few are smoking up outside."

"Well good for them," Nate answered. He didn't seem offended that Patrick had brought it up, but he didn't seem interested either.

"Not your thing?" Patrick asked. He had grown to respect Nate, but he was far from understanding him. Sometimes he acted like a 30-year-old in a teenager's body.

"Nope," Nate answered, shaking his head. "Even if it were, my mom would kill me. Totally not worth it."

"She still waits up for you?" Patrick was amazed at the thought. His mom was exhausted when she got home from work and was almost always asleep when he got home on the weekends, whether on the couch in front of the TV or upstairs in her room.

"Are you kidding?" Nate laughed. "She waits up for me and hugs me good and tight until she's smelled my hair, my skin and my clothes. One time my cousin had been smoking—cigarettes, okay? Not even reefer—and she beat my tail to an inch of my life because she smelled it on me. So like I said, not worth it."

Slowly, the mystery of what made Nate different from Patrick's general ideas about black people was beginning to fade. He couldn't picture what Nate's mom would look like, but he began to understand that she was the reason Nate knew all the answers in math, why he was careful to speak properly to the teachers, why his clothes were perfectly ironed, his hair impeccably cut, why he didn't bang, and why he had no tattoos, or at least none that anyone could see.

"Man, I'd die if my ma were that strict," Patrick offered sympathetically.

"Yeah, well ironically, I'd probably die if she weren't." Nate let his statement hang in the air, but before Patrick could respond, Nate pointed to the dance floor and exclaimed, "Oh shit!"

A brawl had broken out between black and white students in the middle of the gym, and without thinking, both Nate and Patrick rushed to break it up. Patrick pushed himself to the center of the knot, grabbed two of the white kids by their shirt collars and jerked them back hard enough that they lost their breath for a moment. Nate reached around one of the black kids from behind, pinning his arms to his sides and telling him firmly to calm down. By the time the nuns and priests rushed over, the tension had dissipated and the students were returning to their separate groups in various corners.

The music continued unabated; it was unclear if the DJ had even noticed what was going on.

Nate nodded to Patrick before he walked back across the gym and joined a group of black students. Patrick and Kiley met up again at the next slow song, swaying to the music and letting their bodies press together whenever the nuns' backs were turned. Patrick snuck out back to drink his beer, and then returned for a few more dances. Soon he was ready to leave; he and Kiley had conspired to take off a little early, so they'd have some extra time before her mom expected her home.

Patrick had just said bye to Slick, when he heard a loud whisper come from the back door.

"Patrick!!" It was PJ. What the hell was he doing at Cathedral's homecoming?

"Jesus, PJ, what are you doing here?" Patrick asked, moving toward the door. "If you wanted to come I could've got you a ticket," he added with a laugh.

"No, no, I don't want to come in," PJ said quickly, his voice agitated.

"What is it?" Suddenly, Patrick was worried. PJ was always care-free, cracking jokes as easily as he breathed. Something must be really wrong.

"Look, I gotta put something in your mom's trunk. I'll get it out before morning, I swear to God, but I gotta put it in there right now." Patrick's stomach lurched. This sounded like trouble, but he knew he couldn't say no to his cousin.

"Dammit, PJ," he said, handing him the keys, "bring the keys right back and I swear if whatever it is isn't gone by 6:00 in the morning, I'm throwing it down the sewer."

PJ shot him a look of gratitude, snatched the keys and was gone without a word. Patrick said nothing when Slick came back to retrieve the jacket he'd forgotten. The fewer people who knew, the better.

Whatever was in the trunk haunted his thoughts as he and Kiley walked to the car, but by the time he was in the empty parking lot around the corner from his neighborhood, it was the farthest thing from his mind. The look in Kiley's eyes let him know his calculations had been correct, and soon they were in the back seat kissing and fumbling with each other's zippers and buttons.

Patrick had never been with a virgin before, and he was a little scared she would scream or change her mind. Twice he asked her if she wanted him to stop, and both times she told him to keep going. In the end she was quiet, but he felt her body tighten with pain and saw that her cheeks were stained with tears when he was done. He kissed her neck, and held her as long as he felt like he could before he had to drive her home.

## CHAPTER 7



### Suffolk County Jail, June 1991

“SO WHAT ARE you doing in here, young man?” the counselor asked. “I saw your record. No priors. Catholic school, even.”

“I’m here because I was in the wrong place at the wrong time,” Prospect said bluntly. “It’s not that complicated.”

“I hear you. I’m sure that had a lot to do with it,” she admitted, trying to sound sympathetic. “But everyone in here also made certain decisions that led to getting arrested. No one ends up here by purely by accident.”

“You sure about that?” he asked, raising his eyebrows quizzically.

“I see you have a tattoo,” the counselor remarked, trying a different tactic to get him to open up. “Looks pretty new. What does it mean to you?”

He shrugged. “Not sure what it means now. It meant something when I got it.”

“I’m not that familiar with the *Bible*,” she said. “Can you tell me what verse that is?”

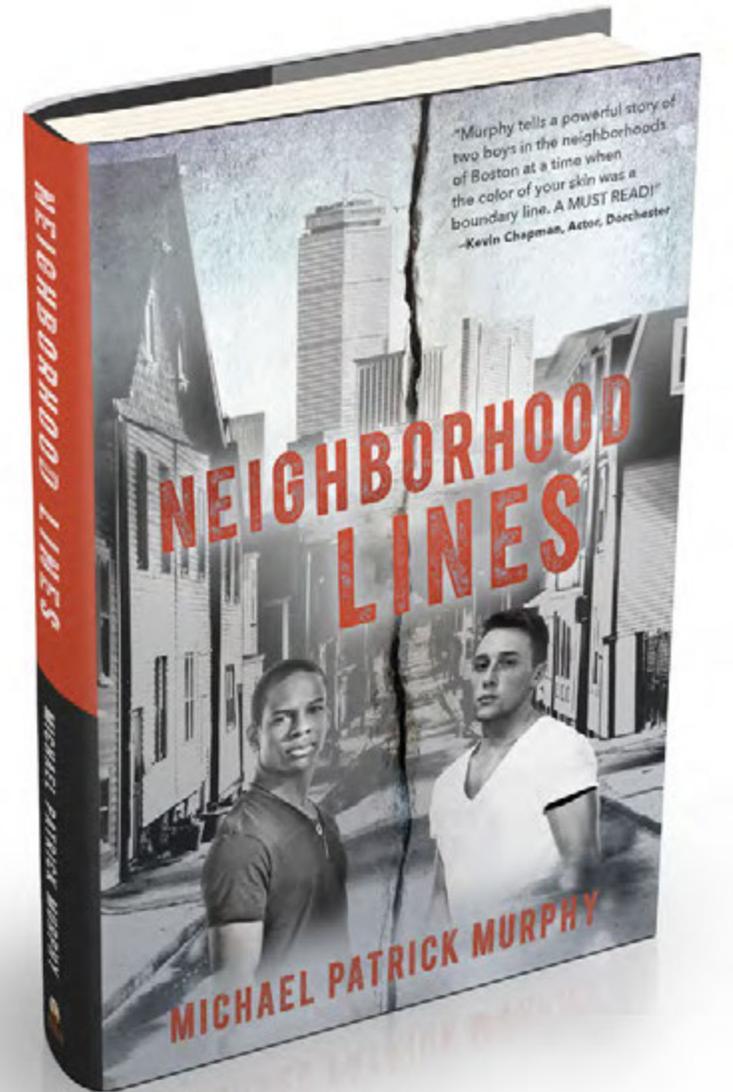
His eyes remained fixed on the floor, he stayed silent for a long time. Finally he spoke, “It’s about God and vengeance.”

## NEIGHBORHOOD LINES

“And why did you choose that verse?” she asked.

“It’s a long story.”

“I’ve got plenty of time.”



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