

FADING



A Martyrs Short Story

By MC Hunton

Fading

A Martyrs Prequel Story

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Part One

Long, gray shadows threw the whole street in early darkness. Massive skyscrapers to the west blotted out the sun well before the horizon did, casting East Village in soft blues even on this warm, July evening. Cyrus sat against the wall outside the Stop n' Shop and bit into a dry tuna sandwich as he watched the tail end of the rush hour crowd walk by. People looked straight ahead or down at their phones, ignoring anyone and everything as they hurried home after work. Cyrus didn't know how to be so disconnected. He'd spent six years learning to pay close attention to what was going on around him in order to make sure the world didn't catch him unaware and crush him underneath its heel.

"Cyrus!"

A familiar voice drew Cyrus's attention, and he turned to see a young, skinny boy walking up the street. His shirt and pants hung off his body like oversized rags, and a grin broke his dark face open from ear to ear. Cyrus glanced over his shoulder, flipped his shaggy blonde hair out of his eyes, and peered through the window into the store. Then he turned back to the kid.

"Aren," he said, raising his brows, "what the hell are you doing? You're gonna get me in trouble!"

"I won't stay long," Aren said, and though he crossed his slender arms around his chest, his smile didn't fade.

"Does Darius know you're here?"

"Yeah," Aren said, but there was a sheepish glint in his eye. Cyrus raised a brow, and the boy groaned. "Okay, *no*, but I had to tell you!"

"Tell me what?"

"I got a new job!" Aren came over and sat next to Cyrus. He'd recently turned twelve—the same age Cyrus had been when he'd lost his mother and his home—and already Aren had been through so much more than Cyrus had at that age, including work. "That

mean jewelry guy wants me to help guard his stand! I'll get paid in *actual* money!"

"Wow, man," Cyrus said, and he playfully shoved Aren's shoulder. The boy laughed. "Great job! When do you start?"

"Tomorrow," Aren said. "And Darius says—"

Suddenly the door to the Stop n' Shop flew open and a woman rushed out, carrying a sobbing child in her arms. A thick, angry man followed after them. His beady eyes landed right on Cyrus. Cyrus swore and jumped to his feet.

"What the fuck are you doing?" the man snarled. He took one look at Aren and flailed his arms like he was shooing off a stray dog. "No loitering! Get on! Get out!"

Aren quickly got to his feet and scurried away. The man turned back to Cyrus and pointed in the door. "Some stupid kid overflowed the slushie machine—get in there and clean the mess up."

"Sorry, Lonnie—"

"And how many times do I gotta tell you, don't feed those homeless rats! They'll start hanging around and scaring off my customers. Now get in there and *clean*."

A spark of rage and a little bit of fear woke up in Cyrus's gut. He was one of those "homeless rats." If Lonnie found out, Cyrus could lose his job and everything he'd worked for.

He bit back his anger and hurried through the door. There was a mess all right. Lime green slushie lay in a sticky slick across the grimy tile. Cyrus quickly walked around it and hurried to the back. He folded the uneaten part of his sandwich back into its wrapper, stored it in his employee locker, and grabbed the mop and bucket from the closet. When he returned to the front of the store, Lonnie was back in his chair behind the counter. He watched Cyrus come out from the back with an ugly frown on his face.

"Next time I catch you feeding another rat, I'm docking your pay," he said. Lonnie's balding hair made his forehead look huge, and he raised his brows high upon it. "You understand me?"

Cyrus gritted his teeth and his hands wrapped tightly around the handle of his mop. He wanted to swing it at Lonnie. Hit him over the head...

But instead he took a deep breath and mumbled, “Yes, sir,” as he dunked the mop into the bucket. Head down, just like he’d learned to do when he’d been working on the Williamsburg Street Market.

“Keep your mouth shut, Cyrus,” Darius had always told him. “Words can hurt, but they’re just words. If you’re not in danger, walk it off. It’s not worth the fight.”

Cyrus couldn’t afford to lose this job over wounded pride. So he wrung the mop head out and shook the loose water before he slapped it back onto the tile and smeared it around the spilled slushie. Bright green lines seeped into the brown grout. He could see Lonnie watching him from the corner of his eye.

“God, I fuckin’ *hate* kids,” the man muttered at last, and he reached under his table and pulled out a dirty magazine he only read when the store was empty. He kicked back in his chair and opened the front page. “Always making a fuckin’ mess, and they’re so god damned *loud* . I wish we could just round ‘em up and lock ‘em somewhere till they’re useful.”

Cyrus’s anger flared into his chest again. His mind filled with thought of the kids back at the abandoned bar they’d turned into a home. Of their *mess* , dirty blankets and broken toys strewn across the floor, and the *sounds* of them laughing and playing and crying.

It’s not worth the fight, he had to remind himself. He needed this job. He *needed* the paycheck, or some of those kids would go hungry this winter.

A bell chimed at the front of the store, and Cyrus glanced up as his boss hastily shoved his smutty magazine back under the counter. A couple of young men walked through the door, hoods pulled over their heads, hands shoved deep in their pockets. They didn’t start browsing the aisles. Instead, their eyes darted around, scoping the place out, counting how many people were in the room. When they realized it was just Cyrus and Lonnie, they shared a look.

Lonnie didn’t seem to catch on, but Cyrus sure as fuck did. His grip tightened on the mop handle, and he started to walk around the shelves, toward the back of the store, where he could get a phone—

“Don’t fucking move.”

Cyrus froze and turned around. One of the men pulled a pistol out of his pocket. The other one shut and guarded the door.

“You—” the guy with the gun brandished it in Cyrus’s direction. “Mop boy—get behind the counter.” When Cyrus didn’t move, too caught up in fear to register what the fuck was happening, he shook the gun again. It was all Cyrus could focus on—the round barrel pointed right at him. “*Now!*”

Cyrus scrambled over. He dropped the mop and immediately tripped right over it, sprawling onto the ground before hopping back to his feet and rushing to stand beside Lonnie. The guy with the gun looked between them. His hollow, acne-pocked cheeks pulled tight against the hard muscles in his jaw. “Don’t try anything funny. Just open the register, and fill up the fuckin’ bag.”

He pointed his gun at Lonnie’s round face as he threw a black backpack onto the counter. Lonnie didn’t move right away. His hands shook in the air, and he’d begun sweating so badly Cyrus could see it pooling on the white t-shirt beneath his armpits.

“Do it!”

Lonnie squeaked and jumped into frantic, clumsy action. He quickly dipped down and opened the register. The drawer popped out with a soft *ping!*, and Lonnie began to grab handfuls of bills and shove them into the backpack. Cyrus’s tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth. He swallowed hard to loosen it as he peered up at the pock-faced guy and at his accomplice standing guard by the door.

“Hurry the fuck up, man,” the guard said, looking back at what was happening by the counter. When his mouth opened, Cyrus saw he was missing a handful of teeth. Then movement over the guy’s shoulder caught Cyrus’s eye, and his jaw fell open. A woman was approaching the store with a curious, suspicious frown. The guy by the door saw the look on Cyrus’s face and quickly turned back around. He swore and grabbed a knife out of his pocket. The woman paused on the other side of the glass. She looked from his face to the weapon in his hand...

Then his eyes went glassy, and he took a step back. She opened the door and walked into the store.

“What, *exactly*, is going on here?”

Her high-pitched voice cut through the silence as she wandered in. Slowly. Confidently. Her plain, brown hair fell in drab waves down the back of her shoulders and her eyelids were so heavy she might have looked bored, except for the venomous, angry look she threw toward the two armed men. Cyrus's eyes widened as he looked back at Lonnie, who just turned to watch the woman with the same shocked expression on his face. The pock-marked gunman moved to target his weapon on her, but the woman shook her head, held up a hand to stop him, and he dropped his arms.

"How dare you come into my part of town—"

"Hey, bitch—"

"*Do not interrupt me when I'm speaking*," the woman said. Immediately, the man's mouth slammed so tightly shut it looked glued together, and his scarred cheeks went tight again. The woman went on, her brows furrowed angrily over heavily-lidded eyes. "Now answer my question. *What is going on here?*"

The gunman glanced to his accomplice while Cyrus and Lonnie exchanged a quiet, dumbfounded look. At last, the guy with the pistol turned back to the woman and shook his head. Suddenly, he was very meek.

"We were just trying to get some cash—"

"Why?"

"I-I just," he stammered, and he scratched the back of his head. Cyrus noticed he had open sores there. "We needed the money."

The woman frowned. "For *what?*"

"Food," the guy said. A lie. Now that he was paying attention, Cyrus saw the track marks on the guy's arms and noticed just how hollow his face was. "Rent. We just need to—"

"God, you make me sick," the woman cut in, and she took another step into the store. The man by the door slinked backward, closer to the counter, and the gunman's eyes darted down at his feet. The woman went on. "*You* are the problem with the world today. I'm working to make this place strong, and people like you come in here with this *entitled attitude*, like you *deserve more* without having to work for it, and you ruin everything I've accomplished..."

“Listen,” the guard said. He carried the same signs of addiction. Hollow eyes. Twitchy hands. Sores around his face. “Lady. Please, don’t call the cops...”

“The police are the *least* of your worries right now...”

“We’re sorry. It won’t happen again.”

“Of course it won’t,” the woman said. “I’ll make sure of it. Is that clear?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Good,” she said. “Now get *out* and go *jump off a bridge* .”

The man at the counter quickly walked away—shoving the gun in his pocket and abandoning the backpack on the counter—and moved toward the door. His partner followed suit. Placidly. Almost mechanically. The two of them strode out onto the street, turned east, and disappeared into the crowd.

Cyrus and Lonnie stared after them. Cyrus’s mouth had fallen open, and for the first time in several minutes, he gulped down deep, lungfuls of breath. He looked back to the woman. She walked further into the shop and let out a quaint, perturbed huff.

Lonnie turned to take her in, too, and his attitude shifted.

“Go on,” he snarled at Cyrus as he quickly pulled the backpack of money under the counter and out of sight. “Finish cleaning up that mess.”

Cyrus happily bowed out. He walked past the woman as she came through the store, apologizing as he lifted the mop out of her way and shifted the bucket. She walked past him, and Lonnie cleared his throat.

“Well,” he said, squaring his shoulders and puffing out his squishy chest. “Those boys’re lucky they listened to you, sweetie. I didn’t want to have to hurt them...”

“It’s such a shame,” the woman said, annoyed. Her voice was so high it was almost uncomfortable to listen to. “*These* kinds of people. They come into nice neighborhoods like this and ruin it for the rest of us.”

“Ya got that right,” Lonnie said. He leaned over the counter and flashed a gross little smirk he thought looked sultry. “You handled

yourself real good there. I like a woman who doesn't tolerate bullshit."

Cyrus couldn't help it. He rolled his eyes and let out a little sigh

—
"Hey, *you* get to mopping!" Lonnie snapped, pointing a fat finger in Cyrus's direction and throwing a hot, angry glare. Then he cleared his throat and turned back to the woman. She'd come even closer, almost to the counter, and Lonnie flashed that stupid smirk again. "Sorry 'bout him. Just turned eighteen, and this is his first 'real' job, so he don't have manners yet. Now, what can I do for *you*, hon?"

The woman turned to take Cyrus in. Her flat lips fanned out in a forced smile before she turned back to Lonnie. Cyrus put his head back down and focused on his mopping.

"I'm just walking around the neighborhood," the woman said. Her tone filled with a sweetness that felt like a front she put on with customer service to get what she wanted, and she pushed her lips out in a small, deflated pout. "Looking for a few regulars who can help me keep troublemakers from moving in and ruining this part of town. How often do you come in to work?"

"I practically live here," Lonnie said, like that was something worth bragging about. He inched forward on the counter, propping his elbows on the laminate surface. "I own this fine establishment, and I'm right there with ya. Rats like that gotta go."

The woman laughed, and Cyrus felt that anger flutter to life again, so he looked down at his work and started mopping earnestly. *Anything* to distract him from the disgusting display going on at the front of the store. He was almost done. The floor didn't look particularly appealing, but at least the slushie was cleaned up. Then he could go hide in the back and count inventory, alone.

"That's wonderful," that high voice cooed. "Then I'm going to need your help..."

She didn't say anything then, but just leaned in and focused on Lonnie's face. The man's eyes narrowed a little, and he reached up and scratched one of his temples with a wince—

Then he nodded and said, "Yes, sir."

Cyrus's brown eyes narrowed.

The woman nodded, and the smile on her lips widened a little more. "Good man," she said, patting Lonnie's hand. He gave her a dazed, confused little smirk. Then she turned and took in Cyrus. His heart skipped a beat as she began to walk his way. He stood up a little straighter, moved the mop handle in front of himself like he could hide behind the fucking thing. The woman stopped just shy of five feet away from him and looked him over.

"And you," she said, "You work here?"

"Yes, ma'am," he said.

"Excellent. Then I'll want your help, too."

And she stared at him for a long, awkward moment. A nagging ache started at his temples. God, he hadn't realized how tense the robbery made him. He rubbed the sides of his head and shook the feeling away.

"So, uh," he said. "What do you need?"

The woman's smile faded, and her eyes widened. She looked him over and shook her head.

"Excuse me?"

"You said you wanted my help?" Cyrus asked. "With what?"

But she just kept staring at him, confused. Then she gestured to the floor by his feet.

"You missed a spot."

He glanced down to see the clean tile underneath his dirty sneakers.

"No I didn't—"

His temples ached again, worse this time. He winced, closing his eyes, and when he opened them back up—

There was green slushie *everywhere* .

Cyrus's mouth fell open and he stared at the ground.

"What the *hell* ..."

He looked back up to the woman. She smiled again and gave a soft laugh with that sugary, high-pitched voice.

"Good," she said. "Glad to see we're on the same page. Now, I'm going to need your help—"

Suddenly tires screeched to a stop outside. Lonnie reached under his counter. He pulled out a bat and moved toward the door with a similar mechanical cadence the thieves had when they'd left.

And the woman's sweetness dissolved like she'd been doused in hot water. She looked away from Cyrus, out the door, and whispered, "*Fuck*."

He looked up, too, but he couldn't see anything. Thick smoke overwhelmed the street outside. It crashed into the windows. Whorls of gray haze churned like dirty water against the glass—

Then a tight, painful surge wrapped all the way around Cyrus's head and his vision went gray. He closed his eyes to blink it away...

When he opened them again, he was outside. Swirling colors, muted, like he was seeing them through smoke, clouded his vision. A humming drone of shouting and crying and wailing sirens filled his ears in a dull, echoing chorus. His muscles moved—he didn't move them. His arms propped above his head, his fingers wrapped tightly around the wooden handle of his mop, as though he was about to swing it down. Cyrus shook his head, or he tried to, but searing pain tightened around his skull like a vice.

His eyes slowly came into focus. There *was* smoke. Tons of it. Furling all around him, full of movement and screaming and—

A woman.

She materialized in front of him like a dream, striding into focus as she stepped through the smoke. The first thing he noticed was her eyes. Chilling and black, they centered on him. A furious, driven look tightened her striking face—thin lips pressed into a line, her long, black hair flying about her head in wild wisps. Dusty patches smeared her rich, black clothes, while dark red streaks coated her porcelain skin. Her arms were bare except for two black, fingerless gloves. In her hands, she clutched a pistol.

And that pistol pointed right at him.

But she didn't shoot. For an agonizing moment, while Cyrus's muscles refused to move, and the band around his head grew tighter and even more painful, they stared at each other. Her lips gently parted, and her dark eyes widened in wonder. The gun was steady—pointed right at his chest.

He opened his mouth to speak, but he couldn't get the words out.

His vision started to go gray again—

She shifted—drew her weapon away from his chest and leveled it at his left thigh.

And she pulled the trigger.

The bullet tore through his muscle and sent hot, jolting rivets of pain up his leg, into his spine, and his mind—

The band around his head *snapped*, breaking over him in an ice-cold rush, like someone had poured a slushie into his brain. It washed over him in a bone-chilling sensation, from the base of his skull, and he sank into unconsciousness.

* * * * *

The world rocked and rumbled, and Cyrus groaned. His eyes fluttered open, but he couldn't focus. All he saw was a blur of gray and movement. His body vibrated and bounced, getting pulled left and right, and a pair of hands came down to steady him. He shifted again, and sharp pain flew through his leg. He cried out.

“Get me a sedative,” a woman's voice said. Deep. Dark. Her hands pinned him down, holding onto his shoulders with a tight, urgent grip. More movement. More pain.

Cyrus screamed again, and the woman took the opportunity of his mouth being open to pour something down his throat. It tasted awful, and he choked on it, but almost immediately, a numbing relief flushed through his body.

“He'll be fine,” a different woman said. His pain began to subside. He hardly noticed as someone jabbed his bicep with a sharp needle and injected something into his muscle. “An ambulance would have picked him up.”

The whole room jolted to the side again—and Cyrus realized it wasn't a room. It was a *car*. To his left, a blonde woman in body armor pulled her helmet off and put it beside an open med kit by her knee. She braced herself as the vehicle turned again.

“He *broke free* .” The deeper voice again. To his right. “I saw it. He came back *on his own*.. .” Cyrus tried to turn his head, but his muscles felt heavy and uncoordinated. He barely managed to catch her out of the corner of his eye. A blur, somehow both light and dark at the same time. His eyelids fluttered. It was getting so hard to keep them open...

Part Two

Cyrus woke up to a bright, white room.

The ceiling above him shone with long, incandescent bulbs. They poured light down on him and made his eyes ache. He closed them again. God, his head was spinning, but at least the pain was gone...

Most of the pain.

His thigh throbbed with dull, aching pulses. Cyrus tried to raise his head, but it was no use. He felt groggy and light, like his consciousness wasn't actually seated inside his body, but instead hovered just outside it. To his left, a tall metal stand dangled a bag of liquid above him, and Cyrus realized he was tethered to the thing. A long, plastic tube stuck into the veins at the back of his hand and looped up to the bag. He wanted to feel surprised, to feel fear, to feel *anything* , but he couldn't, and a realization struck him.

He'd been *drugged* .

Whatever these people had pumped him full of made him feel floaty and weak, but he tried to get up anyway. He turned and threw his bare legs out from a thin, gray blanket and off the side of the bed. A rush of cool air slipped up the bottom of his gown and in through its open back, sending goose bumps along his arms. His left leg groaned in protest. Cyrus pulled the gown away to see a thick, white bandage wrapped around his thigh.

God, what the hell had *happened* ?

He ran his hands down his face and thought back, but his mind was foggy and uncooperative. Memories came to him in flashes. The last thing he really remembered was work. Talking with Aren out in front of the store. Lonnie freaking out, making a kid cry, and ordering Cyrus inside to clean up bright green slushie all over the floor. And then...

Then they'd been robbed! Or almost robbed. Until that woman with the weird voice walked in...

From there, his memories were harsh and fragmented, like puzzle pieces that didn't belong to the same picture. He vaguely recalled being out on the street, but how the fuck had he *gotten* there? All he knew was that he'd been outside...

And a woman had shot him.

A different woman. With black hair and black clothes and streaks of bright, vibrant red across her pale skin.

He looked back down at his leg.

Jesus, he'd been *shot!*

"Good afternoon. I'm glad to see you're awake."

Cyrus startled as the curtain around his bed pulled to the side, and a man walked through it. He wore pale green scrubs and a white medical coat, which hung open. His brown hair was graying at the temples, giving him a distinguished look, and he smiled as he held out his hand. "I'm Dr. Harris. How are you feeling?"

"High," Cyrus said with a groan. He ran his hands down his face. "What did you give me?" The room still spun a little. Dr. Harris brought his hand back in and crossed his arms over his chest.

"Morphine," he said. "You might feel a little airy, but it should wear off soon. Then I'll start you on less intense painkillers—"

"Where am I?" Cyrus opened his eyes and looked around again.

"A hospital."

"*Which* hospital?" Cyrus demanded. "New York P? Sinai? NYU?" He paused as a sense of dread filled him. "I'm not at Bellview, am I?"

"No," Dr. Harris said, and he provided Cyrus a small, kind smile. "This is a private hospital. Don't worry. We'll get you fixed up and back on your way."

Cyrus shook his head and tried to stand, but the doctor came forward and grabbed a hand around his shoulder. He held Cyrus back with almost embarrassing ease. That's what he got for living off of rice and beans—and barely enough of it to get by. He felt weak and helpless.

"Look, I don't have the money for this kind of—"

“You don’t have to,” the doctor said, and his steely gray eyes connected with Cyrus’s. His heavy brows furrowed over them, and his fingers tightened reassuringly against Cyrus’s shoulder. “We have this covered. No strings. No tricks. My only concern is getting you *better* . Now please, rest.”

He eased Cyrus back onto the hospital cot. Since the room was still spinning, and his legs felt like jelly beneath him, Cyrus allowed it.

“Now,” the doctor said, after he got Cyrus situated and double checked all the tubes connecting him to the stand to his side. “You didn’t have any identification on you when they brought you in. I could just call you *John Doe* , if you would like...”

“It’s Liam,” Cyrus lied.

“Liam...?”

“Just Liam,” he responded, and his jaw set firm. The doctor looked him over with an eyebrow raised, then his mouth turned up into a half smile and he let out a soft chuckle.

“All right, *Just Liam* ,” he said. “Take some time to relax. I’ll have one of the nurses bring up some food from our kitchen. Is there anything else I can get for you?”

Cyrus stared at him, dumbfounded. Confused. A little bit relieved.

“No,” he said. “I’m fine.” The doctor nodded and began to turn away, but Cyrus called him back. “And, uh... Thanks.”

Dr. Harris smiled. “It’s my pleasure,” he said, then he shut the curtain and disappeared.

* * * * *

Cyrus sat in bed and listened to the *nothingness* outside his curtains, staring at the ceiling above him, wondering how the hell he was going to get home.

It had been twelve hours since he’d been brought into this “hospital,” but it wasn’t like any hospital he’d ever seen. What he remembered from old TV shows didn’t match up. There weren’t rooms. Instead, he was in a long ward with dozens of beds partitioned off by privacy curtains. One end of the ward had a door

reading “triage,” while the other side had an exit, a nurses station, some offices, and the operating room. A couple of bathrooms stood on the wall opposite from him. It felt strangely military.

The other weird thing was the number of patients... One. Cyrus was it. The bright, sterile white of the room, the stillness, the *quiet* felt disconcerting. Cyrus’s life had always been filled with clutter and noise and *people* . A lot of people. A terrified longing filled up his chest.

They would be so worried about him. He had to get home.

Suddenly, a door opened, interrupting his thoughts, and a new noise entered the room.

Footsteps, sure and focused, that he didn’t recognize.

And a deep, steady voice.

“Is our guest awake?”

Cyrus’s heart skipped a beat. He sat up, threw his legs over the edge of his cot, and pulled his curtain back, opening a sliver just enough for him to see through. A man stood by the nurses station. He struck a stark contrast with the rest of the room. He was tall and slender, but not skinny. His black slacks and deep red button-up added a splash of dark and color Cyrus hadn’t seen in this room before. The man’s facial features were cut in handsome, angular dimensions, and a neat, trimmed goatee framed his mouth. A veil of pin-straight raven-black hair, which he pulled behind one ear, fell down far enough to touch the collar of his shirt.

A young nurse, her brown hair held up in a messy bun at the back of her head, nodded. “Yes, sir. He’s in bed six.”

The only bed shielded behind a curtain.

The man turned and looked right at the crack in the drapes. His intense, half-empty black eyes caught Cyrus’s, and it sent a chill down his spine. He quickly pulled back and sat down on the bed again. Those confident footsteps made their way toward him.

When the curtain pulled back, Cyrus just stared.

Now that he was up close, he was struck with just how *tall* this guy really was. He had to be at least six three, maybe more. He looked down a long, sharp nose at Cyrus as he stepped forward and held out his hand. Cyrus felt like not going along with this would be

the wrong move to make, so he grabbed it. The man's grip was firm, bordering on painful.

"Do you mind if I join you?" the man asked.

Cyrus didn't think he had a choice to refuse, so he just shrugged. The man pulled a metal chair away from the wall and brought it to the side of Cyrus's bed. He lowered himself into it. Even seated, he was still as tall as Cyrus. He leaned forward and clasped his long fingers between his knees while he took Cyrus in. Then he smiled. The expression looked practiced on his face.

"How is your leg?"

Cyrus looked down at his thigh. The doctor had given him a pair of generic gray sweats, and the bandage was hidden beneath them. He felt a surge of guilt come up for the jeans he'd been wearing. Darius had insisted he buy himself some new clothes with his first paycheck—to look the part, and *feel* the part, of someone with a stable job and real income—and now those pants were totally ruined. Part of him had been tempted to ask to keep them, but he was sure they'd gone in the trash as soon as the hospital staff had cut them off him.

There was a good chunk of his hard-earned money, thrown in the gutter.

"It's fine," Cyrus said.

"The doctor tells me the injury was superficial and you should be well enough to leave in the next couple of days," the man said. "You will need to properly clean and dress your wound for a week or two on your own. Do you know how?"

Cyrus shook his head.

"It is not too complicated. I will instruct Dr. Harris to teach you before you leave. We will also send you off with antibiotics to ensure there is no infection."

"Thanks," Cyrus said, and he shifted uncomfortably on the mattress.

"Of course. Now, what is your name?"

"It's Liam."

The man watched him for a moment, unreadable, but at last he shook his head with an almost disappointed beat.

“Your *real* name,” he said.

Cyrus blanched. The man watched him through deep, black, half-empty eyes for a long moment. When Cyrus still didn’t speak, the man went on.

“Your real name is Cyrus Liam Murphy, is it not?” he said, and Cyrus’s stomach twisted up into knots. He still didn’t answer, and the man kept talking. “You were born in Weeksville in 2072. Your mother, Sophia, worked as a nurse at King County until you were ten. You never knew your father.”

The air around Cyrus narrowed in around him, and he found it hard to breathe. The man wasn’t finished. He watched Cyrus calmly as he spoke.

“When you were ten, your mother lost her license for stealing prescription medication and selling it in order to afford rent. She took a plea bargain and got off on community service, where she connected with two women who offered her work on the pier. In the next two years, she was arrested four times for sex work. After the fourth arrest, she never came home.”

Then the man paused. His intense gaze didn’t move from Cyrus’s face, and Cyrus felt panic rising between his lungs. He swallowed hard against a dry throat and shook his head.

“How the hell do you know all that?”

“It is all public information,” the man said. “And if *I* can learn this much about you in less than twenty-four hours, so can the people who did this to you.”

Cyrus looked back down at his leg, and his mind thought back to the woman who had shot him. Her piercing, black eyes. The shocked look upon her face. Cyrus shook his head, and his attention snapped back up to take the man in again.

“Who the hell *are* you?”

“The less information you have about who I am and what I do here, the less these people can hurt you.”

“She already hurt me,” Cyrus said, indicating his thigh.

The man frowned. “Who?”

“That woman with the black hair,” Cyrus said, and the man’s frown deepened. His heavy brows fell dark over his eyes. “Suddenly

I was out on the street, and that bitch shot me for no reason!”

“You have seen much more than I anticipated,” the man said. “And more than you were meant to. They will be looking for you... Worse, they will be looking for anyone you know—anyone who can give them information on how to get to you.”

Cyrus’s mouth fell open, “B-but why? I don’t know anything!”

The man shook his head. “That will not matter. You witnessed and survived. They will want to silence you.”

For a moment, Cyrus just stared at the man—at his dark, unreadable eyes and cold, matter-of-fact expression. A heavy weight of powerlessness fell down onto his shoulders.

He thought back to his home—to the kids, to Darius—and his heart dropped into his stomach.

“Mr. Murphy,” the man went on, “we need to contact your family. We need to get them somewhere safe.”

“We can’t,” Cyrus said quietly.

“Why not?” the man asked. Cyrus looked down at his hands and pulled at his fingers, cracking the joints just to give him something else to focus on. He could feel the man’s attention hot on the top of his head.

“What can you not tell me?” he asked.

“It’s complicated,” Cyrus said, clearing his throat, pulling at fingers he’d already cracked so they wouldn’t pop anymore, but fuck, he just needed something to do with his hands. He looked away and shook his head. “A lot of good people could get in trouble. A lot of trouble. I gotta be careful...”

The man frowned.

“Who would get in trouble?”

Cyrus didn’t say anything—didn’t look up from the tile by his feet.

The silence stretched on for several long, painful seconds. Cyrus felt his heart beating in his throat in rapid, erratic pumps. His breath caught in his chest again, threatening to suffocate him. The man didn’t move, and his attention didn’t shy away from Cyrus’s face.

At long last, he took a deep breath and let out a long, slow sigh.

“I am not in the business of turning anyone into the police,” the man said quietly, and Cyrus finally looked back up to him. His mouth was still set into a frown, but now it was more perceptive—more compassionate. “I have no interest in whatever unlawful activities your family may be involved in. I have no faith in our justice system, or any other system our society follows, for that matter, which is why I am currently working to *undo* them.”

“You mean this place is...?”

“Illegal?” the man said shortly. “Yes. Very much so. It is possible I can help you, *and* the people you are trying to protect, if you tell me what exactly they *do* .”

He paused, let that sit in the air, and Cyrus’s stomach gave a small, excited flip. The man waited, watching him with those cold, black eyes. Cyrus wasn’t sure what to say, or to do. One of the first rules he and all the other children had been taught was to keep their mouths shut around people they didn’t know.

People they didn’t know they could trust.

But what option did Cyrus have here?

And... what if this guy, with his fancy clothes and special hospital, could *help* them?

“It’s not a big deal,” he said slowly, and he gave a sad laugh and shook his head. “Okay, that’s a lie. It’s a big fucking deal. At least, it is to me. I was orphaned when I was twelve, and this guy took me in. He takes in a lot of orphaned kids.”

“That doesn’t seem illegal.”

“Well, no,” Cyrus said, and he scratched the back of his head. “A lot of what he does ain’t illegal. He helps the kids find work and gain skills. Like me. I’d just be another tweaker on the street if it weren’t for him. But we’re stuck living in a building we don’t pay for ‘cause we don’t have anywhere else to go, and, uh... Not everything we do to get by is legal. He could get in a lot of trouble.”

And they could lose everything.

A gleam shone in the man’s eyes, but he tried to temper it. Not quickly enough for Cyrus to miss it, though. He leaned forward, propping his elbows on his knees, as he pressed steepled-fingers against his thin lips. “Who is this man?”

Cyrus frowned and his stomach twisted up in knots. “You gonna look for him?”

“Yes,” the man said. “As I said, you and the people associated with you may be in danger now. How many children does he have?”

“Why does that matter?” Cyrus asked.

“It must be challenging, feeding even a handful.”

Challenging? They were all homeless, bartering and stealing what they needed to survive. Cyrus shrugged.

“We get by.”

“Cyrus.” A little exasperation finally sank into the man’s words. He sat up straighter in his chair and held his hands out, open and empty. “I am not trying to deceive you. I am trying to *help* you. I run an illegal operation as well, one which is actively working to *dismantle* the people and systems which have forced you into this situation. Please, allow me to help you.”

“We don’t need help,” Cyrus said.

“I am certain you do,” the man said. “I can provide financial assistance, shelter, resources... I am even willing to take you all in.” Cyrus’s eyes widened, and the man went on. “But first, we must make sure these people are *safe*. How can I reach out to this man who took you in? I would like to speak to him in person about helping him.”

Whatever faith Cyrus had in the man before shattered with a terrified, suspicious crack. He tried to maintain his composure, but Cyrus knew what to look out for. His hands were held too tight. His jaw clenched. He wasn’t just happy to help... he was *eager* to.

And that made Cyrus nervous.

“No,” Cyrus said, and he shook his head. “I won’t tell you where he is.”

A flash of anger crossed the man’s dark eyes, but he quickly replaced it. Cyrus’s conviction grew.

“Mr. Murphy, I have no intention to—”

“And I have no intention to tell you where he’s at,” Cyrus said. “I don’t know you. I don’t know if I can trust you. You won’t even tell me your damn name. If my family is in danger, we’ll handle it *alone*.”

For a few long seconds, the two of them just watched each other in tense silence. The man's brows fell heavily over his dark eyes, and that anger swelled. Cyrus's mouth went dry, and he swallowed—

Then the anger subsided, and the man forced a smile.

"Your determination to protect him is admirable," he said, with an honest, impressed nod. "You are quite a loyal young man. He is lucky to have you."

Cyrus felt like he could take a real breath for the first time since this guy had pulled open the curtain. A proud bubble built up between his lungs, and he sat a little straighter on his cot. "We're family," he said. "We gotta stick together."

"I can appreciate that," the man said, and his smile warmed upon his face. "How about this." He reached into his breast pocket and pulled out a small, red business card. "I will give you my contact information. Please, speak to him. Let him know what I am offering here. If he is interested in discussing things further, he can reach out to me." He held the card out. "How does that sound?"

Cyrus grabbed the card, flipping it around as he looked it over. It didn't have a lot of information: just a phone number. No company. No address. No name.

"We probably won't—" he began, but the man raised his hand to cut him off.

"Cyrus, don't misunderstand me," he said. "This is not about *me*. This is about keeping *you*, and *your family* safe."

Then he got to his feet and held his hand out again. Cyrus shook it.

"Dr. Harris will get you everything you need to care for your own injury over the next few days and we shall send you on your way," he said as he began to exit Cyrus's private curtain. He paused and turned to consider him one last time. "I look forward to hearing from you and this friend of yours. I think we will have a lot to talk about."

Then he turned on his heels and walked away. His footsteps seemed a little faster, a little more anxious, upon his exit, and Cyrus was relieved to hear him go.

Part Three

Cyrus woke to bright light again. Bright light and *noise*. He groaned and peered out to see the morning sun shining through buildings to the east, reflecting off glass windows and right into his face. He blinked his aching eyes, rubbed his knuckles over them, and his foggy head began to clear. The familiar sounds of the city surrounded him. Passing cars. People speaking. The rustling of trash tumbling down filthy gutters in the wind.

His eyes shot open and he looked around.

Cyrus was lying against an old brick building. He looked up and down the familiar street. On the corner, he spotted the Stop n' Shop. Bright yellow crime scene tape blocked the door, and shattered glass from the window littered the concrete sidewalk below. An immaculate, green hatchback parked at the shop suddenly roared to life and peeled away from the curb. Cyrus peered in at the driver, but the man pulled his faded navy ball cap over his eyes and disappeared down the street.

Cyrus stumbled to his feet. His head spun, like he was moving too quickly for his brain to catch up, and he leaned against the brick wall and groaned. People hardly paid any attention to him as they walked by on their morning commute, ignoring him the way they typically ignored the drugged and homeless, which Cyrus was beginning to suspect that he was. The muscles on his left arm ached. He massaged his fingers into them as he looked back out around the street.

How did he get here?

The last thing he remembered was sitting in the hospital ward, three days after he'd been shot. He looked down at his body. Yup. He wasn't wearing his own clothes, but instead the gray sweats, white shirt, and a navy hoodie Dr. Harris had given to him. He touched his thigh. The wound ached, and he could feel the bandages beneath the fabric. He reached into his pockets and pulled

out three things: a bottle of antibiotics with instructions written on the side, a small burner phone he didn't recognize...

And the red business card.

Cyrus stared down at it, his heart lodged in his throat.

Part of him wanted to forget about it all—to pretend what the *hell* the last three days had been hadn't happened—but as he stared down at the phone number, he remembered everything that strange, dark-haired man had said.

His family was in trouble.

Was it true? Could he trust it? Cyrus wasn't sure.

He rubbed his eyes with the tips of his fingers again. Whatever drug he'd been given had almost worn off now, and his head felt less dizzy and flooded. He pushed himself away from the wall and began to walk... but he didn't immediately make his way south, toward where he lived.

Because even if the guy was the real deal, Cyrus wasn't stupid. He was positive he was being followed, and he sure as fuck wasn't going to lead him back to the old bar they'd turned into an orphanage until he'd had the chance to talk to Darius alone—well away from where the rest of the kids were.

A bird fluttered in a tree overhead, and Cyrus jumped and clutched for his chest.

Or, fuck, maybe he was just being paranoid.

Paranoia or not, Cyrus started off by heading west. He passed by the old, ruined storefront of the Stop n' Shop and peered in its windows. By now, the place had been looted. The shelves had been knocked over and rifled through, and product lay strewn across the grimy tile. Cyrus climbed through the broken window, ducked some yellow tape, and started to look for something to eat.

If he wasn't going to head home right away, he needed to stock up.

Most of the good stuff had already been taken by now. Any electronics or items of value would have been stolen almost as soon as the cops left the scene, and food items would be picked off more slowly, as the poor and sick quietly stole in and left with arms full of candy bars, bags of chips, and dried fruit. Even all the shopping

bags had been nicked—likely used to carry off the rest of the merchandise.

Without bags, Cyrus started to shove things into the front pocket of his hoodie. Things with substance. He tried to collect small items with lots of calories—things that took up less space and would keep him fuller for longer. Dense protein and candy bars. A small jar of peanut butter. High fat pastries. The soles of his sneakers stuck to gooey, green slushie syrup as he slowly made his way through the mess. He vaguely wondered what had become of Lonnie and realized was going to have to find a new job after this...

When his pocket was stuffed so full he couldn't have fit so much as a roll of mints into it, he climbed back through the window and onto the street.

And he kept walking west.

Cyrus didn't really have a plan. He just wanted to put a little distance between himself and East Village for a couple of days, then make his way back to the market and let Darius know what was going on. Cyrus knew a handful of parks in Bowery he could hide out in for a while, until he felt safer going home.

The streets bustled with quiet, morning movement. People shifted and broke around each other, ignoring one another the same way they ignored the rest of the environment. Cyrus kept his head up, though. His mind raced, worrying what the hell they would do if they had to move again. Could they find a place big enough for all of them before winter set in? He doubted it...

Suddenly, a woman caught his eye.

She stood on the other side of the street from where he was walking. Tall. Slender. Drab. Her heavy eyelids made her look tired, and her brown hair seemed dull in the light. But her focus was sharp, and as soon as she saw him, her flat lips opened up in a smile.

He recognized her from the Stop n' Shop.

She waved at him and gestured for him to wait for her, then she made a break right for him. She ran across the street, out into traffic, without pausing to look. Cyrus's heart jumped, but all the cars slammed to a stop simultaneously without a sound. No honking. No

screaming. Cyrus stood there and watched her, shocked, as she came up onto the sidewalk beside him.

“There you are,” the woman said with that high-pitched voice. A wide, relieved smile softened her face and she reached out to touch his shoulder. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah,” Cyrus said, shrugging and giving a polite smile back. “Yeah, I’m fine.”

“Thank God,” the woman said, and she let out a sigh. “I was sure they got you after they attacked the store.”

Cyrus frowned. “*Who* attacked the store? The robbers?”

“Oh, no,” the woman said, waving him off with a lazy hand. “The Martyrs. They’re a nasty little insurgent group trying to make this city more dysfunctional. I thought I saw them grab you after they set off that smoke bomb. I assumed they brought you back to their little hideout, and I’d never see you again.”

A stone fell into the pit of his stomach. Maybe it *hadn’t* been a hospital.

“Well, I was brought *somewhere*,” Cyrus said quietly, and the woman’s brows furrowed. “Are you saying those people did this?”

“Yes,” the woman said quietly. “This is exactly the kind of thing I wanted your help with. I need to stop them.”

“What could I even *do*?” Cyrus asked.

“Tell me where they brought you,” the woman said.

Cyrus shook his head. “I don’t know. I didn’t see it, and they drugged me when they brought me back.”

The woman’s eyes narrowed. “But you *remember* them?”

“Of course I—”

“There has to be a reason they let you go,” she said, this time almost to herself, then her eyes went wide again, like she’d figured it out. “He didn’t get it out of you, did he?”

Cyrus frowned. “What?”

“Did you tell him anything?”

“Did I tell *who* anything?”

“Blaine,” the woman said, but at his absent look, she went on. “What did he ask you?”

Cyrus shook his head. “I don’t have any—”

But the words got lost in his throat, because he suddenly saw someone else sprinting toward him through the crowd. Her long, black hair was pulled into a low ponytail and swung behind her as she darted between pedestrians on the sidewalk. Her black, void-like eyes fixed on him and didn't move.

It was the woman who shot him!

Fear broiled in Cyrus's stomach, and he turned to run the other way, but the woman with the heavy eyes looked over her shoulder. Everything about her shifted.

Her irises went pin-tight, furious, and terrified.

Her lips curled into a snarl.

Her hands reached out and wrapped around Cyrus's wrist. She pulled him around in front of her, one arm wound around his neck in a tight, painful grip. Something cold pressed against his throat.

And that vice closed in around his head again. Searing pain in his temples. His vision began to go gray. He shook his head and tried to focus...

The woman in black closed in, and her mouth pressed together in a hot, angry line. She leveled a pistol up—over Cyrus's shoulder, to the woman now holding him in front of her like a human shield. The pressure on his temples grew heavier. Thicker. More overwhelming.

"Who do you know?" that sickly voice growled. Terror filled Cyrus, dousing his whole body in a rush of cold fear, as he realized her voice wasn't just by his ear. *It was in his head*. "Who are they looking for?"

"Cyrus." The woman in black stood, stoic and strong. People on the sidewalk strode around them, ignoring them, as though they weren't there at all. The woman in black didn't seem bothered by this. She focused, intently, right at Cyrus's face, like he was the only person in the world who mattered right now. "Fight her. Don't let her in."

"Who are they looking for?"

"It's going to be okay." The dark-haired woman again. She took a step closer. The grip around Cyrus's throat, and his mind, tightened. "You can do this. Don't say anything—"

“Take one step closer and he fucking dies . ”

Cyrus’s world was a swirl of pain and voices. That sickening, biting scream, forcing commands into his consciousness. They sank into his mind and from there wove their way into his muscles. His mouth opened. He tried to stop it, but it was no use.

His tongue formed the words:

“Darius Jones.”

That high-pitched, sweet, demonic voice laughed by his ear.

And something sharp plunged into his neck. It slid through muscle and tendon in a smooth, excruciating movement and *clicked* when it pierced his windpipe. Cyrus tried to scream, but he couldn’t. His throat tightened around the metal in useless, horrifying panic.

The arm around his neck, the vice around his brain, released him all at once and he stumbled forward. He was vaguely aware of the woman disappearing behind him, of a gun going off and someone yelling. He collapsed onto the sidewalk. The pavement bruised his knees and scraped his palms. Wide, bright ribbons of crimson painted the concrete between his shaking hands.

He gasped. Breathed in hot, thick blood. Coughed it up. A metallic, sweet taste coated his tongue. He opened his mouth and tried to speak, but instead of words, a rough, garbled noise poured over his lips in a syrupy mix of blood and saliva. Cyrus raised a hand to his throat and felt the hilt of a knife sticking out from the side.

Then two strong, secure hands came onto his shoulders and gently tilted him back. Instead of staring down at the blood pooling on the ground beneath his knees, he saw the sky. An animal spiraled in circles above him—an anxious, smooth silhouette against the bright blue backdrop. Its wide, webbed wings caught the sun and glistened a deep, blood red. Cyrus hardly had the sense to process it. People continued to walk past like he didn’t exist.

All but one.

The woman in black came into his frame of view. Her hair was falling out of its ponytail. Long, dark strands draped around her face and cast her sharp features in shadow. Her hands were covered in half-finger gloves, and they grabbed the sides of his face and tilted

his chin to look at her. Deep, black eyes looked right into his, filled with rage, regret, and heavy sorrow.

“Hold on,” she said. Her deep voice was steady. Steadier than Cyrus felt. She brushed his hair away from his face. Her fingers felt warm and comforting against his skin. “Help is on the way.”

He opened his mouth again. He wanted to say he was sorry. Tears swelled behind his eyelashes. He felt them pour out the corners of his eyes, onto his temples, into his hair...

“Don’t worry,” the woman continued. “I’ll find him first. I’ll get him. I promise.”

Cyrus nodded. Or maybe he didn’t. He didn’t know. His legs were numb. So were his arms. His whole body shook from the cold, and his lips felt frigid and stiff against his teeth. He watched the woman, took in the details of her face. The world around him began to dissolve. Black spots dotted his vision, starting at the edges, speckling in slow circles toward the center until all he could see was the void behind her chilling black eyes.

Then everything faded into darkness, and Cyrus faded with it.