

Chapter 1

New Orleans, Louisiana – the Early Years

I was born the eldest of nine children in a poor family living in New Orleans, Louisiana. We were raised by my maternal grandmother's sister (Aunt Tessie) in a very religious family. We attended church regularly, every Sunday. "Grandma", as we affectionately called Aunt Tessie, was a good person in every sense of the word. She was a God-fearing, loving woman trying to raise nine kids on a \$300 welfare check. Granted, this was the 1970s and prices were much cheaper than they are today, but that amount of money just wasn't enough for so many kids. Somehow, she managed. We children understood this struggle and assisted Grandma with any extra money we could get our hands on.

We lived in an area of New Orleans called Hollygrove. It was a ghetto. Hollygrove was a crime-infested, drug-ridden haven for crooks and up-and-coming crooks. It was so bad, in fact, that if you took a twelve-year-old boy into that slum, dropped him off and returned seven days later to retrieve him, he would have become a fully fledged criminal. In the early seventies I was a criminal too. Any angle to make a fast dollar. My buddies and I roamed the streets of Hollygrove day and night looking for an easy hit.

How all nine children came to be raised by Grandma is unclear to this day, but I do know my father left the family when I was young and I have no memory of him. Being the oldest, I assume my siblings don't remember him either. What I do know, from family discussions,

is that he was an orphan from the state of Texas. After being adopted, he served in the United States Air Force. His mother, whose name was Lydia, was unknown to me also, so Grandma was the only person in my life, besides my siblings, whom I knew intimately.

As we grew up in Hollygrove my mother lived on the other side of town and later moved to Baton Rouge. On occasion she would visit us at Grandma's house and some of us stayed with her for very short periods of time. I hardly knew anything about her other than she was a very intelligent woman and had a vast knowledge about many subjects, which always impressed me.

My siblings and I never knew what happened between my father and mother to cause their separation. My mother always appeared uncomfortable discussing the subject, so we often asked Grandma why we didn't stay with our father or mother. Grandma simply told us not to worry about that – end of discussion. Furthermore, she explained we were *her* children and reassured us that she would raise all of us. We wondered what was going on. Other families we saw – most of them, anyway – enjoyed having both parents under one roof. So despite Grandma's reassurances, I continually wondered, "Why don't we live with our parents?"

My siblings and I were a strong and feisty group. After me, the oldest was my brother Tony, an aspiring United States Army career soldier. Tony was exceptionally disciplined even as a child and was by far the quietest in the family. After Tony came my brother Kenth, who was similar in appearance to Jimmy Hendrix with long, black braided hair. He had a carefree, eccentric personality. Following Kenth was my brother Kwame. Kwame was a spontaneous character. Once, after watching the 1970s TV show *Kojak* starring Telly Savalas, he decided the next day to shave his head and walked around sporting a lollipop in his mouth! He could see a film about anything at all and want to be "that person". Next, my brother Keith was a ladies' man. All the girls floated towards him, not necessarily because of his looks (which he possessed), but because of his gift of the gab. The last of the boys was the "baby boy", Jack. He was a blend of us all and had an unpredictable nature – he might flip when you thought he would

flop, or dive when you thought he would duck!

After the boys, my mother had three girls in succession. Valerie, the oldest girl, was the fighter. She wasn't scared of anyone or anything. Then there was my sister Vivian, who was sort of quiet and known as the practical one – logical, methodical, not careless or reckless. Finally, there was my sister with the unusual name – Thecla. She was the outright baby of the family. Thec (for short) was the girl that hung with the boys. She could play sports or complete a task just as skillfully as any boy. She had a very strong mind and was instrumental in helping me later in my life.

Grandma hustled constantly and did anything she could to feed, clothe and protect us. Physically she was an old, frail lady, but her belief in God carried her in life. Often, she would sit all nine kids around her in the living-room and tell us about all the things she went through as a young lady growing up in Denham Springs just outside Baton Rouge. During her twenties, Denham Springs was controlled and operated by the Ku Klux Klan and she told us stories of the rape and murder of her neighbors and friends by Klan members, as well as sharing family folklore and tales of survival against the odds.

Along with her accounts of real events, Grandma told us many parable-like stories to teach us moral principles. Once, after I had been late for school, I vividly remember her telling me a story – which was also related to the fact that I was known among my siblings for talking too much. Grandma said that bad things could happen to a person who didn't want to listen to instructions.

“Once, a flock of birds were up north with severe cold weather approaching,” she told me. “All the birds got together and decided it was time to fly south. But this one bird decided to tell the flock to fly down and he would meet them later. The flock flew south while this one bird stayed behind to conduct other business. After his business was completed he started his flight south.

“By this time, about halfway through his journey, the air was bitterly cold and the bird's wings froze. Eventually he fell to the ground, unable to move with his frozen wings any more. After a few hours, a fox passed by and happened to squat down to release

excrement on top of the unseen frozen bird. After a few seconds, the bird thawed and began tweeting and chirping happily. The fox looked behind, however, heard the chirping, noticed the bird and promptly devoured him.”

In amazement, I questioned Grandma about the meaning of this tale. She looked at me sternly, bent towards me and said, “If someone tells you to do something urgently, do it! But if you delay and find yourself in trouble because of the delay, shut up!” I don’t know whether Grandma made this story up specifically for me, but she had many similar tales to tell, based on some moral principle or other, designed to get us to live decently and to help us remember her mantra: *“Do the right thing!”*

Because times were so hard, on one occasion, when I was about fifteen, I convinced three of my younger brothers to assist me in robbing a small grocery store situated down the road from our home. Grandma was struggling to feed us, so I naively thought stealing from the store would help her. I informed my brothers of my plan, namely that we would go to bed as normal, around 10 p.m., and act as if we were sleeping, then meet on the back porch after Grandma was asleep.

We met at midnight, sneaked around the back of the store and managed to break into the storage area. We stole sodas, sweet potatoes, green beans, loaves of bread and packs of dried beans. Afterwards we hid these items in our home, even though we knew full well that Grandma was a very spiritual lady who would never approve of us stealing. Unfortunately for us, a neighbor called Mr. Hamilton had observed the burglary in progress and, unbeknown to us, called the New Orleans Police Department to report the crime.

In due course the police arrived with sirens wailing and emergency lights flashing. They came straight to Grandma’s house and banged on the door. They woke up Grandma, who answered the door. The four of us were in bed, faking sleep. I overheard the police explaining to Grandma that an eyewitness had observed her grandchildren stealing. By this time, the owner of the store had also been woken by the police and summoned to the scene, and was

standing in our living-room.

We were dragged out of bed and brought downstairs, and with Grandma's permission the police searched the house for the stolen goods and, of course, located them – everywhere! We had placed items in our closets, under our beds, behind the sofa and in various other places throughout the house.

Grandma was extremely hurt and angry that we would do such a thing. Of course, the worst thing you can do to an elderly lady at 1 a.m. is to wake her to discuss her grandsons' thievery!

Eventually all the neighbors were up and standing around outside, wondering what was going on, which was surely a terrible embarrassment to Grandma. The police officers discussed with the store owner the charges that would be brought against us, but miraculously he refused to take any legal action. Instead, he said all he wanted was for his stock to be returned and he would be happy with that resolution. Grandma then spoke privately with him. Following their discussion, they spoke to the police, who agreed not to arrest us. After the police left, Grandma informed us that we would return all the stolen items in the morning. We went back to bed, but hardly slept, terrified about what would happen the next day.

We conducted our crime on a Friday evening. This meant the next day was the weekend and all the neighborhood kids and adults were at home. At about 9 or 10 a.m. Grandma made the four of us gather together the stolen goods and carry them down the street, in broad daylight, back to the grocery store. The whole neighborhood came out to watch us do it, while Grandma directed us from the front porch. We were acutely embarrassed, while all our friends and neighbors stood by laughing and taunting us. As if that were not enough, when we returned, shame-faced, Grandma made each of us go inside, put on one of her dresses, and sit on the front porch in front of everyone for several hours! By the time she allowed us to return inside, suffice to say, none of us had the nerve to go outside for the remainder of the weekend.

As you can tell, Grandma did not play games. Under her stern influence, consisting of regular beatings and time out for misbehavior

or being banned from playing outside, none of my guilty brothers stole again. Me, I was a little bit more evil or just stubborn. Instead of being reformed, I simply vowed I would never let her catch me stealing again.

My siblings and I tried to assist Grandma the legal way, by means such as delivering newspapers, babysitting and running errands, and this helped her some, but not enough. I came to believe that crooked money was faster and simpler to obtain. I could steal a car, strip it, sell the parts and make \$500 for only five hours' work. In the mid 1970s \$500 was plenty of money. If someone managed to do this several times a month, then it suddenly became a lot of money. In this way I supplemented Grandma's paltry \$300-per-month income, easily doubling it. Though it was the wrong thing to do, I have no idea how our family would have survived if I hadn't.

In 1975 I was twenty years old. One day, I pondered what I would do with myself. I figured I couldn't pursue crime all my life, but I had no clue as to what else I could do. My only income was gained via car theft, my life was leading nowhere good, and I had to develop a plan to get out of the ghetto. I was the oldest kid in our family and I was supposed to be setting a good example for the others to follow. The problem was, I had no good example to follow myself. I kept thinking about how my father had left us when we were very young. "How could he abandon his wife and nine kids?" I wondered. It seemed a remarkably callous thing to do.

In those days, there was no such thing as mandatory child support either. Lucky him.

*“What a job,” I thought.
“A former criminal, now a
police officer.”*