

## Chapter 1

Could this entrepreneur and self-proclaimed community activist and child advocate also be a child abuser?

The airplane window reflected the damning words and photo that glowed on the screen of Dwayne's laptop. He reached up and adjusted the nozzle on the overhead airflow vent, but it did no good. His body would need to be frozen in a block of ice to offset the angry heat rising within him. And even that probably wouldn't be enough to melt his fury.

He skimmed the text displayed on the screen.

*A family court judge ordered Dwayne Harper to attend parenting classes for physical abuse of a minor over whom he'd been granted guardianship and full parental responsibilities.*

Laying his head against the seatback, he stared up into the ceiling. "They're going to pay for tarnishing my name with these lies," he whispered, trying to ascertain whether he could levy a lawsuit for slander or defamation.

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*King of Lawndale*  
by Janice M .Allen

A tall, slender flight attendant stopped next to his row, balancing a tray on her arm. “Here’s your drink, sir.”

Dwayne lowered the lid on his laptop. He knew the story on the screen was fabricated, but the woman smiling suggestively at him wasn’t aware of that fact. Neither was anyone else who might catch a glimpse of the post and his photo.

The flight attendant reached past the man asleep in the aisle seat and handed Dwayne a miniature bottle of Tanqueray and a plastic cup containing ice and some tonic. “Can I get you anything else?”

He nodded toward his uncle. “Just some pretzels and water for when he wakes up.” Dwayne lowered the man’s tray table and read the flight attendant’s name tag as she laid several tiny snack packs and a bottled water on it. “Thanks, Erica.”

When she was several rows past him, Dwayne opened his laptop and adjusted the zoom down to seventy-five percent before clicking on another link his “almost” fiancé, Tiffany Richards, had emailed to him. An identical post popped up on a different Facebook page. He clenched his teeth.

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Dwayne had opened Excel Charter School on Chicago's Westside three years ago. He had worked his fingers to the bone to maintain a decent amount of social media exposure about how Excel was positively impacting kids whose potential had been overlooked and underfed in public schools. But it had only taken a half hour for over a thousand people to comment on this scandalous post. And only about a dozen had come to his defense. He shook his head.

Scrolling down the page, he read some of what people were saying.

*I wouldn't be surprised if it was more than just physical abuse. He probably sexually abused that girl too.*

*God don't like ugly. Folks get a little money and influence, and they think they can do anything and get away with it.*

*I say put him in jail and let the inmates do to him whatever he did to that poor kid.*

Dwayne took a couple sips of his gin and tonic, then tapped the elbow of the man napping peacefully beside him.

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“Read this,” Dwayne said, turning the laptop toward his uncle after the man’s eyes opened.

Uncle Bubba stretched, rubbed his eyes, then pulled a pair of owl-rimmed glasses from his shirt pocket. As his gaze swept across the screen, he frowned with each sentence.

“They’re publicly accusing me of abusing a child,” Dwayne complained in a course whisper.

His uncle took his glasses off his smooth brown face and laid them on the empty seat between him and Dwayne. “Calm down, boy. I know that’s not who you are. Everybody in the Lawndale neighborhood knows it. And those kids you mentor sure know it.”

“Sanchez is behind this.” Just saying the man’s name made the hair on Dwayne’s neck stand up.

Alderman Eduardo Sanchez had been accused of trying to bribe a couple of State Charter School Commissioners to deny Dwayne’s renewal application even though Excel had met all the qualifications. Sanchez was acquitted of the charges because

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there was no clear evidence linking him to the crime. And because he had the judge in his back pocket.

While Excel had narrowly escaped having its charter revoked, having been sanctioned on a warning list had done almost irreparable harm. The school was operating in a limited capacity at the moment. Dwayne was still mired in the appeal process for a full reversal of the District's decision.

Uncle Bubba tore open one of the pretzel bags, then unfastened his seatbelt as if his stomach would need extra space to accommodate the micro snacks. "If you think that man is gonna quit comin' after you, nephew, you better think again. You been in his crosshairs ever since you opened that new school. Especially after the people in the neighborhood cheered you on."

He popped several miniature pretzels in his mouth and spoke as he chewed. "Sanchez has stayed in office all these years by makin' promises to do this and that for the schools in his district, then sayin' it didn't get done because the State tied his hands."

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Opening his water, Uncle Bubba took a swig before adding, “But then you come along and make him look real bad ‘cause you raise enough money from the private sector every year to provide the nurses, social workers, and head docs at Excel that Sanchez only promises to put in the public schools in this district. You gotta understand what’s really going on. That man thinks the people are gonna want you in office instead of him.”

Dwayne mulled that over a moment. “You know that’s the furthest thing from my mind, Unc.” He turned the laptop toward himself and tapped a few keys to make the post disappear.

“Educating young minds is my passion.”

A flight attendant walked the length of the plane, stopping at each row to offer second helpings of snacks.

“Well, being one of the Kings of the Castle was the furthest thing from your mind too before you finally accepted the invitation to join them.” He gave his nephew a pointed look. “Or did you forget that? ‘Cause I can guarantee you Sanchez hasn’t.”

The Castle was more than just a magnificent edifice. It was a humanitarian organization founded by Khalil Germaine and

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comprised of individuals referred to as Kings. Each King had the power, resources, and global connections to affect positive change in communities worldwide. Unfortunately, the Castle's mission and reputation became tainted because a few Kings were intent on using their influence and the Castle's resources to feed their own insatiable greed for money and power.

Khalil had set out to clean house by recruiting new managing members to replace the crooked Kings. Scholars at the Macro International Magnet School he had founded in Chicago provided a perfect pool from which to select new recruits to groom for the Castle. Dwayne had been one of eight boys Khalil mentored. Under Khalil's leadership, they were taught to have each other's back like brothers. They had grown up, gone their separate ways, and made their marks in the world before it was revealed to them that Khalil's mentoring had been geared toward preparing them to take their thrones at the Castle.

"That Castle and your brothers are a powerful bunch," Uncle Bubba said, repositioning himself as a heavyset man in a shirt threatening to pop all of its buttons squeezed down the aisle.

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“And now add the Knights into that. Sanchez should be afraid. From what you tell me, his position in the Castle is on shaky ground ‘cause he ain’t upholdin’ the standards.”

The Knights were a younger group of men employed at Jai’s health center. The Kings were now mentoring them to handle issues that plagued their communities.

“Sanchez knew what the Castle stood for when he agreed to be one of its managing members and didn’t hold up his end of things,” Dwayne replied. He wiped condensation off his plastic cup. “If he’s about to be tossed out, he doesn’t have anyone but himself to blame.”

Uncle Bubba reclined his seat a little. “Don’t matter. He’s still ticked that somebody, especially a newcomer like you, is replacin’ him and all of those men who did such ugly things under the cover of darkness.”

Dwayne reached for his laptop case under the seat in front of him. He opened it and pulled out a tattered flyer that had a picture of him alongside a white man in a U.S. Immigration



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Customs Enforcement uniform. They were shaking hands in front of the restaurant area of Excel.

The man in the photo was Dwayne's college roommate Teddy Styles. A few months earlier, Teddy had been unlucky enough to have his face shown in a CBS news story about the incident where, in one day, ICE agents arrested some seven hundred undocumented workers in food processing plants in Mississippi.

The flyer Dwayne held showed Teddy's picture from that news story as well as the image of Teddy and Dwayne outside Excel.

"Remember this?" Dwayne asked Uncle Bubba as he sat the paper on the tray table between them and tapped it. "It caused almost half of my Hispanic scholars and staff not to show up at school Monday and Tuesday of last week."

Uncle Bubba looked at it and let out a long, slow breath. "Neither one of us would've guessed in a million years that somethin' like this would be on every windshield and light pole within five blocks of the school. Folks lookin' at this picture

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don't know you was just congratulatin' Teddy on his transfer to the ICE field office in Chicago.”

Dwayne thumbed the edge of the paper. “I spent three whole days last week making phone calls and personally visiting my scholars and staff at their homes, trying to convince them that I wasn't helping ICE plan an immigration raid at Excel.”

“Everybody workin' for you is legal, ain't they?”

“Yes, and so are all the scholars,” Dwayne answered. “But some of them have undocumented friends and family. They were scared that if they were taken into custody, they'd be pushed to give up the identities and locations of the undocumented people they know.”

When an older flight attendant with frizzy red hair came down the aisle holding a plastic bag open, Uncle Bubba brushed pretzel crumbs off his tray table and into a napkin. He tossed the napkin, pretzel wrappers, and empty bottle in the trash bag.

Dwayne realized that the moment the plane landed he would need to put in a call to his King brothers and get some advice on this personal attack being launched against him. Each one of

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them had professions and intelligence that would help him formulate a plan. He had done the same for them when issues arose in their lives that required all hands on deck. Dro was the fixer; Daron was the tech guru and inventor; Vikkas, an international lawyer; Jai, a doctor; Grant, a commercial architect; Kaleb, an award-winning property developer; Shaz, a family and immigration lawyer; and Reno, the owner of a domestic violence shelter. These men had become family when they reconnected after an attempt had been made on the life of their mentor, Khalil.

“Well, nephew, you can’t let Sanchez mess up the kids’ chance for a better life just ‘cause he can’t stand to see nobody succeed but himself.”

“It must have been people like him that Aung San Suu Kyi was talking about in *Freedom from Fear* when she said, ‘Fear of losing power corrupts those who wield it.’”

Uncle Bubba nodded. “Yep, he’s desperate ‘cause he’s a drownin’ man.”

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“And I’m just the man to tie a weight around him so he’ll sink  
to the bottom where he belongs.”

## Chapter 2

“You promise not to hurt any of the kids, right?” Chanel Bordeaux asked. Layers of silky dark hair were piled atop her head like a crown, accentuating her high, regal cheekbones. She stepped into the six-inch Jimmy Choo sandals laying beside a midnight blue crushed velvet sofa.

“I can only give you my word that I won’t kill any of them,” Eduardo Sanchez conceded. “But if I have to get rough with the students to get Dwayne Harper’s attention, then that’s what I’ll do. Whatever it takes, I’m making sure he never gets that school fully reopened.”

Sanchez paced the floor, running his freshly-manicured fingers across a thirty thousand dollar Rolex Sky Dweller. “And I want that managing membership seat he has at the Castle. He has no idea how much power it holds or what to do with it.”

He grabbed a wallet off the coffee table. The heftiness of it and the designer label were both reminders of his financial

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prowess and all the under-the-table deals he'd brokered to make it happen.

"I love how you fight for what you want," Chanel said to her lover. She pulled a compact and Givenchy lipstick from a Prada clutch purse, and intensified the color on her garnet lips.

Always decked out in designer wear from head to toe, the two of them were a perfect match. The fact that he was more than twenty years her senior was a non-factor. Few men at age fifty-five could carry the swag he possessed.

He beckoned her to him.

Chanel took her time crossing the room, the fringe on the hem of her tight black dress swinging with each step. When she stood in front of Sanchez, he stroked a hand across the small of her back. "I could use your help in getting Harper out of the picture. He's a threat that I didn't take seriously at first. I do now."

She pushed back from him. "So is this why you're with me? To use my position on the State Charter School Commission to keep him so busy fighting to keep his school open that he won't have time to try to dethrone you?"

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Sanchez shrugged. “You have a problem with that?” He traced the line of her chin then caressed her skin with his lips.

“No.” She placed her hand over his. “Actually, I wondered what took you so long to ask for my help.”

Dwayne, and his connection to both students and their parents, were direct threats. One major difference about Excel was that it had a resource center for parents. In this center, parents had access to computers, help with resumes and job applications, and even a place to take online classes. The parents of each scholar were required to be part of creating their child’s education and life plans, so they would then be aware of the part they needed to play to help their child achieve the goal. This resonated with people throughout Sanchez’s ward. People couldn’t get enough of sharing how their children were excited to learn again.

Instead of a cafeteria, Excel had a full-service restaurant that was open to the public in one area of the building. Scholars ordered their meals from the restaurant early in the day so their food would be ready when they arrived at the private areas

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during their designated full-hour lunch period. On Fridays, parents met in the school restaurant, which was run entirely by those scholars whose life plan included a career path in owning a restaurant or in hospitality management.

Dwayne Harper was positioning those students for success, but the fact that their parents were taking note in a substantial way was something that could come back to haunt Sanchez.

“So how much is this favor going to cost me?” he asked, pulling a credit card out of his wallet. He loosened the bow at the top of her low-cut dress and slipped the American Express card into her small, firm bosom.

Sanchez never had to pay to play when it came to women. He got any woman he wanted. None of them grew to be anything more than a short-lived fling, except in those uncommon occasions where the woman could offer something that helped further his crooked agenda. Chanel was one of those rare ones. For a woman like that, he didn't mind putting a little money in the game.



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“My grandmother used to store things in her bra,” he said with a smile. “I can’t tell you how many times she lost something, thinking it was secure.”

Chanel extracted the credit card out of her bosom and slid it into her purse. “I can tie Dwayne’s paperwork up in so much red tape that the new kids he wants to enroll will be great grandparents by the time he fixes all the problems I create.”

“No, that’s not enough.” He kissed the hollow of her neck, followed by long, lingering kisses around her cleavage. “I need his reputation smeared too. I need you to get close to him. Find out some things about him. We all have skeletons in our closets, or at least a bone or two.”

Chanel grazed her teeth across his neck, then breathed in his ear. “Get close to him, huh?” She curled her leg around his thigh. “This close?”

“Maybe not that close,” Sanchez said in a low, throaty chuckle.

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### Chapter 3

Miguel Ramos didn't flinch as the man sitting before him in a three-piece suit stared him down. The teen squared his shoulders and walked up to the marble-topped oak desk that separated them. "What makes you think you can take people's money and then make them live like pigs just because they're old and don't have anybody to look out for them?"

Caesar Wilson waved Miguel off. "You'd better get out of my face, little boy." He turned his attention to shuffling through papers on his desk, not bothering to make eye contact.

Miguel cleared his throat and waited for the man with a dark complexion that matched those beady eyes to meet his gaze. "With all due respect, Mr. Wilson, I'm not a little boy. I'm sixteen. I'm about to graduate high school next year and go to college to study law so I can go after crooks like you." He pointed at the man who had caused his grandmother a world of grief, eyeing him with ill regard. For months now, he had

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pleaded with his father to allow his grandmother to come live with them, all to no avail. His father didn't want another mouth to feed, though Miguel's mother was the only one bringing in money and doing the feeding.

Caesar stapled a few of the pages he held. "This is grown folks' business and you don't know anything about it."

"You must be crazy to think you can get away with treating my grandmother and the rest of these seniors like this," Miguel shot back. "They pay you way more than that fleabag they live in is worth. And what do they get for their hard-earned money? Absolutely nothing." He slammed his hand on the desk.

Caesar visibly blanched, but quickly recovered with a smug smile. He motioned for Miguel to continue.

"They live in apartments that have no working stoves and refrigerators. Some of the doors are falling off the hinges because neighborhood thugs keep breaking into the units. But you just keep hiding out"—he gestured to the elaborate furnishings in the room—"here in your high class office, collecting the rent and leaving your tenants to fend for

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themselves. That ends now. Your rental properties aren't fit for human habitation."

Caesar Wilson's lip curled with disdain. He aimed steely eyes at Miguel. "Don't come in here flinging those ten-dollar words at me. My obligation as landlord is to provide them a place to stay as long as they pay their rent."

"Illinois law says it has to be livable," Miguel countered. He inhaled deeply to tamp down his frustration. "Their apartments are barely fit for a dog, let alone a person. Does your place look as bad as theirs?" He smacked his forehead. "Oh wait, I forgot. You live in one of those fancy high-rises downtown."

"Where I live is none of your business," Caesar ground out.

"I bet you wouldn't be able to keep living there if the rent from these rundown apartments stopped coming in, would you?" Miguel folded his arms across his chest.

Caesar's hands balled into fists atop the desk. "Are you threatening to keep my tenants from paying me?" His tone was low but deadly.

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Miguel narrowed his eyes and matched the man's tone. "I'm saying that I know you received the list of demands I sent to you. I have the Fed Ex delivery confirmation to prove it."

Caesar opened a desk drawer and retrieved an unopened Fed Ex envelope. "You mean this?" He ripped it open, pulled out its contents. Reaching around to the side of his desk, he rolled out a small shredder and fed the pages into it without giving it a glance.

"Do whatever you want with the papers," Miguel warned over the buzz of the shredder. "But know this—if you don't see to it that those repairs are taken care of in the next thirty days, the tenants will use their rent money to get them done."

Caesar laughed, causing Miguel to bristle with anger. He placed his elbows on the desk and tugged on the cuffs of his heavily-starched shirt. "Let them withhold their rent and see if I won't throw them out on the streets." Steepling his fingers under his chin, he added, "Had some other tenants try that same nickel-slick trick. I took them straight to eviction court."

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Caesar stood, but didn't match six-foot Miguel's height. "Now, did I like the fact that for the few months it took to go through the eviction proceedings they lived in my buildings without paying me? Nope, not at all." He fixed those lifeless eyes on Miguel. "But when the sheriffs showed up to kick them out of their apartments, it more than made up for that."

Miguel tracked the man's movements as he stepped around the desk, took three long strides and posted himself directly in front of Miguel.

The slumlord mimicked the sound of a crying baby. "They were boo-hooing and pleading not to be evicted because they had no where to go. They didn't have any family to take them in, and my building was the only place they could find to stay."

He rocked on the heels of his designer shoes, then leaned in so he and Miguel were a mere two inches apart. "It didn't make me no never mind, though, because I don't take to people trying to get over on me."

"But it's okay for you to get over on everyone, right? Especially people who have no other options," Miguel said, his

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mind teeming with thoughts of his grandmother. He affectionately called her Abuelita, which means “dearest grandmother” in Spanish. He often shortened it to Lita.

How excited Lita had been several years ago when she became one of the first to have her Serenity House application approved. Serenity House promised to be like no other because it was backed by a Christian founder and supposedly established along Christian guidelines. The guidelines Caesar Wilson followed were based on greed alone.

Miguel pressed on, even though he worried that the things he had learned in studying ways to help his grandmother were not going to work on Caesar Wilson. “How long do you think Pastor Cordell and his wife are going to keep believing your lies? You saw them and New Calvary as easy prey. Here they were struggling to keep the doors of the church open because most of their members were seniors with little to no money to support the church’s three mortgages.”

Caesar grunted and cocked his head.

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Determined not to back down, Miguel continued. “Many of them were just one Social Security check away from losing their places. You convinced them that God had called you to partner with New Calvary in providing affordable housing for the seniors in their congregation.”

A flush of color rose up from Caesar’s neck. “The Cordells saw my offer for what it was—an answer to their prayers.” He pulled his shoulders back as though bracing for the next onslaught of accusations. “In me, they found a seasoned businessman willing to use his own funds to build senior housing for the congregation, and it would require no money from the church.”

“Which would have been a good thing if you had honored your word,” Miguel countered. “But you put the church’s members in housing you would never think of living in. And when those same members started complaining to you, then threatened to tell Pastor Cordell that the way you were conducting business was smearing his good name, you went on



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the offensive and paid off the mortgages on the church and on the Cordells' home.”

Miguel put a few inches between them. The man's anger was tangible. Miguel had listened to a few of the church members and found that whenever the Cordells got wind of their friends' complaints and brought it to Caesar Wilson's attention, he'd casually bring up that if it wasn't for him, they'd still be worrying about losing their own home. The same way he told the seniors that if it wasn't for his building, they'd be out on the street.

“Keep on mouthing off,” Caesar warned, walking back to settle in his chair again. “Your grandma will be the first one without a roof over her head. And I won't even take her to court first.”