

UNSCRUPULOUS CHOICES

Chapter 2

Meet the Lees

ELIJAH LEE was born in South Central L.A. to Destiny and Malik Lee. The couple never married but happened to share the same last name, which is what attracted Destiny to him in the first place. Shortly after the birth of their second child, Treyvon, Malik disappeared, along with his share of the household income. Destiny never knew if he simply ran off, hooked up with someone else, or got killed in one of his many drug deals gone bad. She only knew that he left her alone with two kids, living in a government subsidized apartment at Hyde Park in Central L.A. The reason didn't really matter.

Destiny learned about life the hard way but never forgot her mother's prescient advice. "You have to work harder than everyone else because you have two things going against you—being Black and being a woman." The young mother worked as a cashier at the neighborhood liquor store during the day and sang in the local clubs at night. Destiny's mother lived in the same subsidized housing complex and served as a built-in babysitter, but that changed when her mom received a breast cancer diagnosis and reluctantly moved into their apartment.

As the cancer progressed, Destiny's responsibilities dramatically escalated. The frequency of the chemo treatments and doctor's appointments grew exponentially, which often conflicted with her cashier's job and completely ended her nightclub gigs. Her frustrations grew as the past due bills piled up. She scoured the internet to learn all she could about cancer care and possible cures, but that search only served to stoke her anger when she discovered the significant racial disparity in breast cancer deaths. Her mother acquiescently responded, "Destiny, the doctors did all they could. "It's in God's hands now."

The chemo eventually proved ineffective, and shortly after entering hospice Destiny's mom died. With no money to cover the funeral expenses,

Destiny reluctantly gifted her body to science and then celebrated her life at the local church, where she gave an emotional eulogy, followed by a rousing rendition of “Amazing Grace.” The whole scene brought back a flood of pleasant memories for her. As far back as Destiny could remember, she and her mother sang in the church choir every Sunday. That’s where she learned about music and how to sing.

Even with a full-time job and the small monthly stipend Destiny received from the government, she struggled to make ends meet. Fortunately, most of her income came as cash under the table once she resumed her singing gigs at the neighborhood clubs. Her deep love of music and her Whitney Houston-type voice made her very popular in the local music scene. But the increased night work brought another challenge. Destiny not only lost her mother, she lost her babysitter, too. Reluctant to leave her twelve and thirteen-year-old kids alone at home, she brought them with her to the clubs, and that prove to be a mixed bag. While it may have been a ready-made daycare, the clubs were frequented by the local high rollers who were involved in the drug trade and other nefarious businesses.

The gangsters knew they were Destiny’s kids and let them hang around their tables, much to Mom’s chagrin. Although the gangsters were generous with their tips to the fabulous singer, she didn’t like her kids hanging around their tables. While the brothers were far too young to understand the intricate dynamics of cabaret life, they were personally familiar with poverty and recognized opulence when they saw it.

The brothers admired the gangsters and became enamored with their street names: Fat Boy, Pit Bull, Razor, and Boxcar. Elijah decided his street name would be “Dread,” while his brother chose “Trouble.” Those nicknames didn’t really stick past adolescence but proved quite prescient in how they eventually came to view life—what they wanted from it and what they did with it once they got it, although neither of them knew it at the time.

The young brothers were completely enthralled with the flashy, high-roller gangster persona, but for very different reasons. Elijah secretly coveted

the gangster's lavish lifestyle, but he knew how they acquired their wealth and harbored great personal disdain for their business ethics. Treyvon didn't care about business ethics. He simply envied their avant-garde, high-fashion persona and their never-ending supply of provocatively dressed women who accompanied them wherever they went.

Treyvon had just entered the seventh grade when he began his inaugural trek down that criminal highway and became a lookout for the notorious drug dealers he met at his mother's cabaret clubs. His proficiency in street corner etiquette and his inconspicuous signaling whenever "Five-O" rolled up, ingratiated him with the dealers. Treyvon's newfound notoriety encouraged his misogynistic approach to the girls he met. By the eighth grade, unlike his older brother, he'd lost his virginity, and that further stoked his already inflated ego. Whenever Treyvon looked in the mirror, he saw a "Denzel." He believed his tough-guy image would get him the respect he longed for when, in fact, he was a short, skinny kid with very little muscle mass and even less for brains.

Though Treyvon was a scrawny kid, he proved to be a reasonably proficient street fighter. He had rescued Elijah from more than a few bad neighborhood encounters, and created a bond between the brothers that could not be broken.

Treyvon realized the street corner sales of illicit drugs would be far more lucrative than anything the high school curriculum offered. After all, he had a built-in connection with some of the biggest dealers in town. The young boy worked the corner for three more years and ascended to new heights, but not in the scholastic sense. He dropped out of school while still a junior and created his own YouTube channel of "gangsta rap," which made him a local celebrity and attracted the provocatively dressed teenage girls in South Central. All that attention propelled him to be the unofficial head of his own coterie.

While Treyvon spent his youth hanging around the tables of the disreputable characters in the various clubs and cabarets, his brother, Elijah, spent most of his time in a distant corner of the club, far away from the booming but melodious sound of his mother's headline act, where he quietly read his books and worked on his homework. Elijah excelled in mathematics, finance, and economics in high school, and his senior year classmates voted him most likely to graduate valedictorian.

All during high school, Elijah worked weekends at the local payday loan and check cashing store, where he ran the cash register and managed the books. He not only lived in the center of obvious poverty, he also saw it on the faces of those who came into his place of business. He wanted out of South Central and hoped to one day move to a place like Santa Barbara. But that took money, which he didn't have and had no idea how to get.

Unlike his brother, Elijah abhorred violence and harbored great personal disdain for the business ethics of the gangsters. He also knew that most of those “tough guy gangsters” ended up either dead or in jail. He felt stuck.

Now that her kids were a bit older, Destiny looked at her mother’s burial urn on the countertop and decided to reclaim her home and return it to the way it was before hospice took over. She immediately set about the task of cleaning and insisted Treyvon help, which he reluctantly did. Everything went, Momma’s clothes, bed sheets, and the electric bed that Medicare paid for. It all went away. She delegated the task of cleaning out the medicine cabinet, which housed all of Grandma’s pills, to Elijah.

The sheer number of bottles surprised him, even though he was the guy who had picked up every one of those meds from the local pharmacy. He recalled the first time Clayton, the pharmacist, scanned the medications. Elijah’s eyes nearly popped out of his head as the prices flashed across the screen. “I can’t pay for that!” he pleaded. Clayton smiled and explained how his grandma’s government insurance covered the cost. Elijah couldn’t believe any medications could cost that much, let alone that the government would pay for them. His head swirled as he picked up the bag of drugs and left for home.

Now, as Elijah set about the task of emptying the medicine cabinet, he stared at those many bottles, some nearly full, and thought, *What a waste*. Then he cracked a slight smile, followed by a mischievous grin that morphed into a chuckle and turned into a full-blown laugh.

Elijah hurried off to the local pharmacy with a bag full of unused drugs and meandered about the store aisles until there was no one in line at the medication pick-up area. He stepped up to the pharmacy window and placed the bursting bag of drugs on the counter in front of the guy who had originally dispensed them, then asked if he could return the extra pills. The pharmacist loudly explained for all to hear that it would be illegal to accept any medication returns. Clayton paused for a moment, then looked around to ensure they were alone. He grabbed the bag, and quietly said, “Give me a moment,” then quickly disappeared into the back office.

Elijah wasn’t sure what to make of this development and waited nervously at the window. Clayton eventually reappeared, placed the bag on the counter, and said in an unusually loud voice, “Take these home and flush ‘em down the toilet.” Then, in a soft voice and with a bit of a smile, he said, “I’ll see ya soon,” and walked away.

Elijah felt confused. The pharmacist knew his grandma had died, and the young man had no reason to return. Elijah offered an awkward smile to an empty window, grabbed the bag, and left for home.

Alone in the bathroom, he opened the bag and found fewer pill bottles than he'd taken to the pharmacy. At the bottom of the bag was a crisp one-hundred-dollar bill, paperclipped to a note that simply read,

"See me after closing today."

Elijah stuffed the bill in his pocket, flushed the remainder of the pills, and returned to the pharmacy at closing time.