

CHAPTER 1 : POTENTIAL

September 2nd, 1987

“Sammy!” Mama exclaimed from the bottom of the stairs. “Come downstairs and eat your breakfast!”

Sammy stumbled out of his bed and tripped over the endless piles of clothes on the floor of his tiny, closet-sized room. As he flung through the piles looking for his aged backpack, he heard something fall to the floor and shatter. He walked up to his wall filled with academic plaques to investigate which frame had fallen. As he walked around his plastered wall, he stopped by a fractured frame and picked it up.

“Of all the hanging frames, the one that falls is my framed University of Chicago brochure,” He said, while smiling and brushing off the hanging glass pieces. “In the fall, I will be a student there. You are my ticket out of the ghetto!” He said, speaking into existence.

After looking around a little while longer to no avail, he asked Mama for help.

“Where’s my backpack, Mama?” shouted Sammy as he tripped over his shoelace.

“Under your bed! Maybe if you cleaned up in there once in awhile, you wouldn’t have to ask!” Mama screamed angrily.

Just as Mama was headed upstairs, he ran past her on the steps. “Slow down, boy!” She said, startled. “You almost knocked me over on the steps!”

“Sorry, I’m rushing! Love you Mama! See you after work tonight!” He yelled as the door slammed behind him.

“Wait! What about your breakfast?” She yelled out the window.

“No time!” Sammy exclaimed, as he ran to the freshly painted yellow school bus.

“Well, how lovely...” She muttered to herself as she watched Sammy’s bus drive away from the window. “I finally make breakfast and this ungrateful child runs off without even a bite.” She shook her head in frustration and began to get ready for another long shift at the hospital.



“Ayo, Sam! Come back here, let me holla at you for a minute,” A voice yelled from the back of the bus.

Sammy looked on in confusion, trying to decipher where the voice was coming from.

“Oh, what’s up, B?” Sammy said excitedly as he spots the location of the mystery voice. He made his way back to the back and plopped down next to his friend. “Pretty boy B!” He said, giving B a high five.

“Oh, stop it!” B said grinning, and stroking his chin.

“So, what’s up, Sam? How was your summer break?”

“Man, you know, same ol’ stuff, Mama on my back riding me about college. Nothing new, the usual,” He said surveying the bus and looking outside the window.

“I’m confused as to why our bus is freshly painted on the outside, yet the inside is still as raggedy as before.” He said stuffing his index finger in a hole on the fading olive green leather seat. “I see Keisha’s favorite fruity gum from three years ago still stuck on the side of this seat.” He disgustedly said.

“Stop it, that’s not Keisha’s gum.” B says laughing.

“I see her major overbite imprint still on it.” Sammy responded pointing to the hardened gum. They both laugh in unison.

“You have no idea how excited I am that we’re graduating this year. I’m ready to go to college and get out the hood.” He continued, swaying the conversation away from the pathetic condition of their old bus.

“Not all of us are as smart as you are, Sam. I’m just trying to graduate and get a job. I’ll be the first high school graduate in my family, and that’s good enough for me!” he said proudly, while looking out the window, daydreaming.

“Why stop there? How about you become the first person to graduate from college as well?”

B’s daydreaming stare turns into a frown.

“You’ve always been an optimist. There’s no way I can afford college, and my grades aren’t good enough to get a scholarship,”

“No B, giving up isn’t an option for us. I say you go to a community college, get your grades up then get into a university. Work three jobs if that’s what it takes!”

“Okay, sheesh! Calm down!” B responds as he puts both of his hands on Sammy’s shoulders. “I have a whole year to figure it out, but I will take your advice into consideration, I promise, so chill out!” Both boys laugh.

“I’m sorry. I just get so worked up when we talk about our futures. I have so many goals. After graduation, I plan on attending UoC and majoring in biological science. I want to become an astronaut.” Sammy said excitedly.

“Now Sam, you know I always got your back, right? But how many black astronauts do you know? I personally think that I have no business in outer space. Keep my black ass on the ground!” B said, belting out a huge laugh and clapping his hands together.

Feeling a little embarrassed, Sammy’s face turned a slight red. B noticed and tried to make up for it with a positive follow up. “You know what though, truthfully, if anyone in this world can beat all odds, it’ll definitely be you. You’re an inspiration to us all. I’ll be the first person on the ground welcoming you back home after your mission to Mars – emphasis on the ground!”

“I don’t think I’d appreciate fried chicken in a can, it takes a real black man to go to outer space.” He continued, while laughing. Sammy mocked B’s laugh, and clapped his hands sarcastically.

“As hilarious as you are, I will become an astronaut, and I will get mom out the hood. I’m glad you love fried chicken so much. Word around town is Georgina’s Chicken spot on Elm street is back up, and hiring. I heard she violates a different health code daily, but pops up with a new restaurant as soon as she gets shut down. I’ll get an application for your unambitious ass! I think she might love chicken as much as you do.” A chuckling Sammy responded.

“First of all, Georgina's big ass loves everything. And I respect my chicken way too much to work at her filthy establishment. Don’t disrespect a brother like that. If she can open up multiple restaurants, with a GED level education, than i’ll open my own before I answer to anyone.”

“See that’s what I’m talking about. Go to college and major in Business.”

“I don’t know about all that.” Responded B.

“But if I come into some money, you better believe ‘Pluckers’ will be up and running, I’ll blow KFC right off the map.” B said doing the cabbage patch dance.

Sammy, and B spent the rest of the bus ride laughing and fantasizing about their futures. As the bus came to a slow stop, they both stood up and walked down the bus aisle. B made a joke under his breath about bus driver Billy as he passed him on his way out.

“I heard that, you smooth face pretty boy, that’s why you can’t grow no facial hair!” Bus driver Billy yelled.

“Yo’ girl didn’t mind last night when she was feeding me grapes on yo’ queen size bed!” B screamed as he stumbled off the bus. The whole bus, including bus driver Billy, hollered in an uproar of laughter.

“Come on, B! Why you always messing with bus driver Billy? You know he ain’t got no girl or no queen size bed! He still lives in his mom’s basement.” Sammy said, feigning concern while shaking his head and putting his hand on B’s shoulder.

“I heard he took his big boned cousin to his high school prom.” Sammy continued, in hopes of making his friend feel badly.

“Yeah, you’re right. I’ll go apologize,” responded B. He quickly ran back to the bus, and just as the last student hopped out, he yelled to his balding bus driver.

“That was rude of me, Billy. I apologize.” He said.

“By the way tell your cousin Markiesha, I said hello. Ask her if I can borrow your grandma’s ’67 Chevy for the prom.” B bursts out in another fit of laughter. The annoyed bus driver aggressively slammed the doors shut. “So, I’ll take that as a maybe?” sarcastically asked B.

Both boys looked at each other and laughed, as they made their way inside the school.

“Aight B, I’ll holla at you at lunch time!” Sammy said, as they approached the main hallway of the school.

As he watched his friend turn the corner and eventually out of sight, he walked around for awhile and spent a couple minutes trying to find locker 610. “Finally!” He muttered under his breath, as he found his ancient, rusted locker. After getting his books, he headed to class.



“Hello class and welcome to American History! I know y’all are so excited to be back, but please, contain your excitement.” Mr. Williams said with a sarcastic tone as the class groaned simultaneously. “For today’s warm-up, please take out a pen and paper. We will be doing class introductions. Again, don’t get too excited,” Mr. Williams playfully said with a smile. Just as Mr. Williams was about to take a seat at his desk, he noticed Keisha waving her hand in the air aggressively.

“Yes, Keisha?” He asked, rolling his eyes.

“Um, Mr. Williams, last time I checked we are at a school in the middle of the ghetto. The po’ south side of Chicago. We barely have textbooks that are readable. All those rich kids in the suburbs, with their shiny new desks, and

gourmet food in the cafeterias should be playing these corny introduction games – definitely not us.” She said popping her gum loudly.

“What exactly does that have to do with anything, Keisha?” He scoffed. “Also throw that gum away! You know the school’s rules, plus you sound like a horse, chewing as loudly as you are,” He pointed to the trashcan. Keisha stomped her way to the trash can, clearly irritated and threw her gum away.

“Does anyone else have any complaints, comments, or concerns while we are at it?” Mr. Williams asked. After waiting a minute and noticing that nobody raised their hand, he continued. “Good, who will get the class started in the introductions?” He was met with silence again. “Don’t all raise your hands at once.” He said in a snarky tone.

“Okay Mr. Will, I’ll go first. I shall bless the class with my brilliant introduction!” Chris said with a mischievous grin on his face.

“Oh, Lord!” Mr. Williams said, throwing his hands up in surrender.

“What Mr. Will, may I proceed?” Chris asked while pretending to straighten his imaginary jacket and bowtie.

“Just proceed, Chris!” The teacher snapped in an annoyed tone.

“Okay well, y’all probably know me as Chris, also known as the lady killer, also known as your future step daddy also known as...”

“Sit down and shut up boy! We don’t have time for games. Y’all are seniors now so y’all better act like it! No more joking around!” Mr. Williams yelled, cutting Chris off before he had a chance to finish his nonsensical introduction. The whole class erupted in a series of claps and laughter.

“Enough!” Mr. Williams hollered angrily. “I’m done, I give up.” He continued, feeling defeated. “You guys sit in these desks from seven in the morning to two in the afternoon and manage to make everything these teachers are trying to tell ya’ll a joke! You guys seem to not understand that this world has already labeled ya’ll from the second you

were born. Because of the pigment of your skin color, America has already labeled you! Labeled you as criminals, as thugs, as a joke!” Just as he was about to sit down in his chair, visibly disappointed, Sammy rose up.

“Y’all chill for a minute! He exclaimed, making his way to the front of the class.

“Look y’all, Mr. Will is right. We can’t take school as a joke anymore. This is our senior year. We can’t give up on ourselves. Just because we don’t have the newest books, or some fancy food choices in our cafeterias doesn’t mean we’re supposed to take school lightly,” he said giving Keisha the side eye.

“We are a lost cause to the world, not only have they labeled us, but they’ve given up on us. We, the ghetto black kids, are useless to them. A waste of life, we are made to fail, we can’t give up on ourselves already. If nobody else cares about us, I know Mr. Williams does. So let’s make his job easier and respect his lessons.” He said, standing in front of the class.

“I’ll start the introductions, Mr. Will. My name is Sammy Jay Brown. I’m from the south side of Chicago’s worst neighborhood. I live with a single mother who works day and night just to provide menial necessities. Pops ran out on us when I was three years old, so my mom had to be both mother and father. I promised my mom when I was five, that she was going to be okay because I got us. I’m 17 now and I’m top of my class with a 4.0 GPA, and I will do whatever it takes to make it to college, become successful and give my mother what she deserves. I plan on being a better man than my father ever was. I don’t want to be labeled, but I am, I can’t change that, but what I can do is rise through all adversity. So if that means I have to do corny introductions to a room full of kids who are willing to not only take the labels given to them, but embrace them comfortably, so be it! I don’t know about y’all,” Sammy stopped and gestured to his classmates.

“But I know that I’m making it out the ghetto!” Sammy said with his fist in the air.

“Sit down, Malcolm X! Ain’t nobody got time for this!” Chris yelled from the back of the class. “I still liked my intro better!” He said, mid-chuckle.

“Thank you for that black power speech Sam, but I doubt any of us will make it anywhere in this world. We just have to accept the cards we were dealt man,” David said from the back of the room. “Once you’re labeled with a permanent tattoo, the ink might fade but it’ll always be visible,” He continued somberly.

Sammy looked down in defeat and quietly made his way back to his seat.

Mr. Williams stood up and began discussing the curriculum of the year as the majority of the class began to blank out and stare absentmindedly. A little while later, the bell rang much to the joy of the class. Keisha screamed out, “Praise the Lord!” while gesturing to the ceiling, and clasping her hands together as the rest of the class chimed a chorus of “finally!” and “thank God!” and other similar exclamations.

As everyone hurriedly made their way out the door, Sammy slowly gathered his books for the next period.

“I really appreciate what you did here today Sam. Of all the kids in all of the years I’ve taught in public schools, I’ve yet to see someone take a stand like you just did here,” He said, walking up to him and helping him gather his books. “I have high hopes for you kid, you have a world of potential, and I can’t wait to see what you do with it,” he continued, handing Sammy his last notebook.

“Thank you, Mr. Will, constantly hearing that we won’t amount to anything takes a toll on us so I appreciate you for the encouragement.” As Sammy headed out the door, he turned back to look at Mr. Williams and yelled: “Don’t worry, Mr. Will. When I become president, you can stay in the Lincoln Bedroom any time you want, free of charge,” He sped off before the pleased teacher had a chance to reply.

“Lord knows how much I love me some Abe Lincoln...” Mr. Williams chuckled and whispered to himself. “If every one of my students had potential like him, I think I’d enjoy teaching again.



CHAPTER 2 :

WRONG PLACE, WRONG TIME

The first day of school was never that appealing to Sammy but now that he was a senior, his happiness could be felt from every corner of the run-down, barely standing Blueford High. Although being a senior gave him an all-day adrenaline kick, heading home was all he wanted to do now, being around students who did not care about their future drained him of life and vitality. On his way out of the school building and onto the school bus, Sammy saw his long time crush, Lisa.

“Hey beautiful!” Sammy said with an innocent smile.

“Oh hey Sammy!” Lisa said, returning a smile.

“How are you? Got any plans for prom, yet?”

“Oh Sam, you know prom is 9 months away!”

“Well, can I reserve you as a date then? I have to ask before the line gets too long!”

“You are so funny and charming. I’ll definitely consider your proposal. I’m very flattered.” She said, blushing.

As he continued to converse with Lisa, he noticed his bus pulling off in the corner of his eye. “Oh shoot! Sorry Lisa, got to go! Please think over my proposal!” He said, winking before running off to catch his slowly moving bus.

“Stop, bus driver Billy! Stop!” Sammy said as he ran after the bus. He desperately tried to get the attention of the students on the bus, not caring for the people staring at the strange boy running through the street like a maniac.

“Please stop!” After running for almost half a mile and realizing that his efforts were lost, he gave up and started walking. He observed his surroundings, realizing that he was now in the more affluent part of town. Picket fences, freshly mowed green nearly perfect lawns, white painted houses and shiny new red convertibles – definitely not his neck of the woods.

“Dammit, man!” He said angrily. “I’m so far away from home! Well, I guess I better tie my shoes and get ready for this long walk. Lisa better let me take her to the prom for making me miss my bus!” Sammy said, throwing a punch in the air.

While sitting on the sidewalk, trying to catch his breath, and wallowing in frustration, he decided to suck it up and started walking.

After walking for about a mile or two, Sammy stopped to take a breath, and just as he did, he found himself drawn to a beautiful single family home. Awestruck at the architectural masterpiece, he started daydreaming while admiring the beauty of the home. The house was painted a clean sparkling white, with clean wide windows and a mesmerizing bright red door. The driveway was paved with brown bricks and multiple plotted plants alongside it. It looked like a typical television sitcom home. Sammy became emotional, stunned by the simple, yet gorgeous home. Living in the run-down and crime-filled hood, he never really had a chance to admire many elegant homes.

“Man!” Sammy whispered as a tear streamed from his eye. “I’ll be here one day. I’ll live in this house. No, wait- I’ll live in a house better than this one. I will succeed, I will succeed, I will succeed!” He repeatedly affirmed to himself. Just as he was about to walk away, he heard a voice yell from behind him.

“What are you up to son?”

Startled, Sammy looked back with tears still in his eyes. “Nothing. Just admiring the beauty of this home, Officer,” He said observing the officer’s name tag.

“I have a hard time believing you live here.” The officer said with a quizzed look.

“Well, Officer, um, Dan, I don’t live here. I’m just passing through on my way home from school.” Sammy said with sadness in his voice.

“What’s your name, kid?”

“Sammy Brown, sir.”

“Let me see your backpack!” He said with a forceful tone.

“Okay, sir.” He replied a little taken aback by the officer’s aggression.

As Sammy handed the officer his backpack, he started to become a little frightened thinking to himself that he might have been at the wrong place, at the wrong time.

“Well I’ll be damned...So you know how to read?” Mockingly asked the officer, as he stared at one of Sammy’s textbooks.

“Wow!” said Sammy under his breath. “Yes sir, I know how to read. I’ve actually maintained a 4.0 GPA all throughout high school.” He boasted proudly.

“I have a hard time believing that kid, and if that were true, I’m sure your school is full of nonchalant teachers, so maintaining good grades couldn’t be that hard.” He responded unimpressed.

“We’ve had a string of burglaries in this neighborhood, and you seem to fit the description.” He continued with a stern look.

“Sir, with all due respect, what would that description be?” Sammy asked, confused.

“Black,” Officer Dan responded.

Shocked, Sammy looked up at the officer with a puzzled look. “Once again with all due respect, Officer, how does my skin color make me a burglar?”

“Statistic don’t lie kid!” Officer Dan said as he tilted the backpack over until all of Sammy’s belongings were scattered on the sidewalk. Sammy saw the frustration in the officer’s face as he realized that the teenager standing in front of him did not have anything outside of normal school related objects in his backpack. He now realized that this officer was looking for any reason to pin a crime on him. He became increasingly more afraid by the second.

“Sir, it’ll be dark soon. I really need to continue walking. Please, may I leave?” He said with a fearful tone.

The officer chuckled sarcastically and mocked Sammy’s words. “Please, can I leave sir?” No you’re going nowhere. Put your hands up where I can see them! Do you have any weapons on you?”

Terrified, Sammy tried to be as cooperative as he could be. “No sir, I only have a pencil, and a pen. I just got out of school, sir. I’m sorry if you’re having a bad day. I’m sorry about the burglaries. I swear sir, I have nothing to do with that!” Sammy said, crying silently with his hands up.

“Shut up boy, cut the crying. You people ruined this city with your crime and drugs. Raised by single mothers leaching off of the government, wasting our taxpayer’s money!” The delusional cop exclaimed.

Sammy was not only afraid, but also very angry at the racist remarks spewed by the disillusioned cop. He knew that nothing he said would make the situation any better so he stayed silent until he could figure out what to do next.

“Were you ever convicted of a crime?” asked Officer Dan.

“No!” Sammy snapped.

“Don’t raise your voice at me!” Officer Dan yelled. “Didn’t your mama teach you to respect people of authority?”

As anger grew inside Sammy the officer continued insulting his hardworking and admirable mother. He clinched his teeth desperately trying to hold back his words.

“Answer me when I speak to you!” Officer Dan screamed as he inched closer, and closer to him.

“Ok sir, I apologize.” He replied with a bleak tone.

“That’s better kid. You will always respect a man of authority. With this right here,” He said pointed to his badge, “I own you. You will listen to me when I address you, and if I think you are a suspect then you are a suspect! Now stand here while I run your ID!” The officer headed back to his patrol car, giving him a second to think.

Now numb all over from a mixture of fear and anger, he tried to find a way to escape the grips of this mentally unstable cop. “Protect and serve, my foot!” Sammy whispered under his breath. Just then a gust of warm wind swept over him. He instantly began to feel overwhelmed and a little nauseous. Everything started to move in slow motion. His heart started racing, as his body temperature rose. He felt hot, and dizzy – a feeling as though he would faint. Something inside of him told him that the only way out of this situation would be for him to run for his life. He feared what could happen if he did not. This officer had no intention of letting him go scot-free. Sammy looked to his side where the cop car was located.

“Maybe, just maybe, if I can start running while this cop is not looking I have a chance of getting away from this psycho fool.” Sammy thought to himself quickly.

Without another thought, he took off as fast as possible, without looking back. The officer noticed Sammy's escape intent through the corner of his eyes and before Sammy could turn his first corner, he booked after him. "Stop, stop, stop! You are under arrest!" Officer Dan screamed as he almost caught up to him. Sammy gained some speed and turned into a neighboring backyard, just as the terrified teenager was about to climb over the backyard fence, afraid that he would lose him, the officer drew his Glock 22 and shot without a second thought.

He shot three times. Gunshot sounds echoed through the quiet suburban neighborhood. Once the crackle, and pop of his smoking gun had quieted down, the neighborhood returned to its eerie silence, until neighbors rushed out in curiosity.