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Soul Circus

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Extract

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CHAPTER 1

THE CHAINS binding Granville Oliver's wrists scraped the scarred surface of the table before him. Manacles also bound his ankles. Oliver's shoulders and chest filled out the orange jumpsuit he had worn for half a year. His eyes, almost golden when Strange had first met him, were now the color of creamed-up coffee, dull in the artificial light of the interview room of the D.C. Jail.

"Looks like you're keeping your physical self together," said Strange, seated on the other side of the table.

"Push-ups," said Oliver. "I try to do a few hundred every day."

"You still down in the Hole?"

"You mean Special Management. I don't know what's so special about it; ain't nothin' but a box. They let me out of it one hour for every forty-eight."

Strange and Oliver were surrounded by Plexiglas dividers in a space partitioned by cubicles. Nearby, public defenders and CJA attorneys conferred with their clients. The dividers served to mute, somewhat, the various conversations, leaving a low, steady mutter in the room. A thick-necked armed guard sat watching the activity from a chair behind a window in a darkened booth.

"It won't be long," said Strange. "They finished with the jury selection."

"Ives told me. They finally found a dozen D.C. residents weren't opposed to the death penalty, how'd they put

it, *on principle.* Which means they found some white people gonna have no problem to sit up there and judge me."

"Four whites," said Strange.

"How you think they gonna find me, Strange? Guilty?"

Strange looked down and tapped his pen on the open folder lying on the table. He didn't care to take the conversation any further in that direction. He wasn't here to discuss what was or was not going to happen relative to the trial, and he was, by definition of his role as an investigator, uninterested in Oliver's guilt or innocence. It was true that he had a personal connection to this case, but from the start he had been determined to treat this as just another job.

"The prosecution's going to put Phillip Wood up there first," said Strange.

"Told you when I met you the very first time he was gonna be my Judas. Phil can't do no more maximum time. Last time he was inside, they took away his manhood. I mean they ass-raped him good. I knew that boy would flip." Oliver tried to smile. "Far as geography goes, though, we still close. They got him over there in the Snitch Hive, Strange. Me and Phil, we're like neighbors."

Wood had been Granville's top lieutenant. He had pled out in exchange for testimony against Oliver. Wood would get life, as he had admitted to being the triggerman in other murders; death had been taken off the table. He was housed in the Correctional Treatment Facility, a privately run unit holding informants and government witnesses in the backyard of the D.C. Jail.

"I've been gathering background for the cross," said Strange. "I was looking for you to lead me to one of Phillip's old girlfriends."

"Phil knew a lot of girls. The way he used to flash . . . even a bitch can get some pussy; ain't no trick to that. Phil

used to drive this Turbo Z I had bought for him around to the high schools, 'specially over in Maryland, in PG? Drive by with that Kenwood sound system he had in there, playin' it loud. The girls used to run up to the car. They didn't even know who he was, and it didn't matter. It was obvious he had money, and what he did to get it. Girls just want to be up in there with the stars. It's *like* that, Strange."

"I'm looking for one girl in particular. She swore out a brutality complaint against Wood."

"The prosecution gave you that?"

"They don't have to give you charges, only convictions. I found it in his jacket down at the court. This particular charge, it was no-papered. Never went to trial."

"What's the girl's name?"

"Devra Stokes. Should be about twenty-two by now. She worked at the Paramount Beauty Salon on Good Hope Road."

Oliver grunted. "Sounds right. Phil did like to chill in those beauty parlors. Said that's where the girls were, so he wanted to be there, too. But I don't know her. We went through a lot of young girls. We were kickin' it with 'em, for the most part. But we were using them for other shit, too."

"What else would he have used a girl like Devra Stokes for?"

"Well, if she was old enough, and she didn't have no priors, we'd take her into Maryland or Virginia to buy a gun for us. Virginia, if we needed it quick. We paid for it, but she'd sign the forty-four seventy-three. What they call the yellow form."

"You mean for a straw purchase."

"A straw gun, yeah. Course, not all the time. You could rent a gun or get it from people we knew to get it from in the neighborhood. It's easy for a youngun to get a gun in

the city. Easier than it is to buy a car. Shoot, you got to register a car."

Strange repeated the name: "Devra Stokes."

"Like I say, I don't recall. But look, she was workin' in a salon, chance is, she still doin' the same thing, maybe somewhere else, but in the area. Those girls move around, but not too far."

"Right."

"Phil's gonna say I killed my uncle, ain't that right?"

"I don't know what he's going to say, Granville."

Oliver and Strange stared at each other across the desk.

"You standin' tall, big man?" said Oliver.

Oliver was questioning Strange's loyalty. Strange answered by holding Oliver's gaze.

"I ain't no dreamer," said Oliver. "One way or the other, it's over for me. The business is done. Most of the boys I came up with, they're dead or doin' long time. One of the young ones I brought along got his own thing now, but he's cut things off with me. Word I get is, he still got himself lined up with Phil. Shoot, I hear they got two operations fighting over what I built as we sit here today."

"What's your point?"

"I feel like I'm already gone. They want to erase me, Strange. Make it so I don't exist no more. The same way they keep poor young black boys and girls out of the public's eyes today, the same way they did me when I was a kid. Warehousin' me and those like me down in the Section Eights. Now the government wants to bring me out and make an example out of me for a hot minute, then make me disappear again. And I'm a good candidate, too, ain't I? A strong young nigger with an attitude. They want to strap me to that table in Indiana and give me that needle and show people, that's what happens when you don't stay down where we done put you. That's what happens when

you rise up. They want to do this to me bad. So bad that they'd fuck with someone who was trying to help me to stop it, hear?"

You left out the part about all the young black men you killed or had killed, thought Strange. And the part about you poisoning your own community with drugs, and ruining the lives of all the young people you recruited and the lives of their families. But there were some truths in what Granville Oliver was saying, too. Strange, following a personal policy, did not comment either way.

"So I was just wondering," said Oliver. "When they try to shake you down — and they will — are you gonna stand tall?"

"Don't insult me," said Strange. "And don't ever let me get the idea that you're threatening me. 'Cause I will walk. And you do not want me to do that."

Strange kept his voice even and his shoulders straight. He hoped his anger, and his fear, did not show on his face. Strange knew that even from in here, Oliver could have most anyone killed out on the street.

Oliver smiled, his face turning from hard to handsome. Like many who had attained his position, he was intelligent, despite his limited education, and could be a charming young man at will. When he relaxed his features, he favored his deceased father, a man Strange had known in the 1960s. Oliver had never known his father at all.

"I was just askin' a question, big man. I don't have many friends left, and I want to make sure that the ones I *do* have stay friends. We square, right?"

"We're square."

"Good. But, look here, don't come up in here empty-handed next time. I could use some smokes or somethin'."

"You know I can't be bringin' any contraband in here. They bar me from these meetings, it's gonna be a setback

for what we're trying to accomplish."

"I hear you. How about some porno mags, though?"

"I'll see you next time."

Strange stood.

"One more thing," said Oliver.

"What is it?" said Strange.

"I was wonderin' how Robert Gray was doin'?"

"He's staying with his aunt."

"She ain't right."

"I know it. But it's the best I could do. I got him all pumped up about playing football for us this year. We're gonna start him in the camp this summer, comin' up."

"That's my little man right there. You're gonna see, that boy can jook. Check up on him, will you?"

"I get the time, I'll go by there today."

"Thank you."

"Stay strong, Granville."

Strange signaled the fat man in the booth and walked from the room.

OUT in the air, on the 1900 block of D Street in Southeast, Derek Strange walked to his car. He dropped under the wheel of his work vehicle, a white-over-black '89 Caprice with a 350 square block under the hood, and rolled down the window. He had a while to kill before meeting Quinn back at the office, and he didn't want to face the ringing phone and the message slips spread out on his desk. He decided he would sit in his car and enjoy the quiet and the promise of a new day.

Strange poured a cup of coffee from the thermos he kept in his car. Coffee was okay for times like this, but he kept water in the thermos when he was doing a surveillance, because coffee went through him too quick. He only sipped the water when he knew he'd be in the car for a long

stretch, and on those occasions he kept a cup in the car with a plastic lid on it, in which he could urinate as needed.

Strange tasted the coffee. Janine had brewed it for him that morning before he left the house. The woman could cook, and she could make some coffee, too.

Strange picked up the newspaper beside him on the bench, which he had snatched off the lawn outside Janine's house earlier that morning on his way to the car. He pulled the Metro section free and scanned the front page. The *Washington Post* was running yet another story today in a series documenting the ongoing progress of the Granville Oliver trial.

Oliver had allegedly been involved in a dozen murders, including the murder of his own uncle, while running the Oliver Mob, a large-scale, longtime drug business operating in the Southeast quadrant of the city. The Feds were seeking death for Oliver under the RICO act, despite the fact that the District's residents had overwhelmingly rejected the death penalty in a local referendum. The combination of racketeering and certain violent crimes allowed the government to exercise this option. The last execution in D.C. had been carried out in 1957.

The jury selection process had taken several months, as it had been difficult to find twelve local residents unopposed to capital punishment. During this time, Oliver's attorneys, from the firm of Ives and Colby, had employed Strange to gather evidence, data, and countertestimony for the defense.

Strange skipped the article, jumping inside Metro to page 3. His eyes went to a daily crime column unofficially known by longtime Washingtonians as "the Roundup," or the "Violent Negro Deaths." The first small headline read, "Teen Dies of Gunshot Wounds," and beneath it were two sentences: "An 18-year-old man found with multiple

gunshot wounds in Southeast Washington died early yesterday at Prince George's County Hospital Center, police said. The unidentified man was found just after midnight in the courtyard area behind the Stoneridge apartments in the 300 block of Anacostia Road, and was pronounced dead at 1:03 A.M."

Two sentences, thought Strange. That's all a certain kind of kid in this town's gonna get to sum up his life. There would be more deaths, most likely retribution kills, related to this one. Later, the murder gun might turn up somewhere down the food chain. Later, the crime might get "solved," pinned on the shooter by a snitch in a plea-out. Whatever happened, this would be the last the general public would hear about this young man, a passing mention to be filed away in a newspaper morgue, one brief paragraph without even a name attached to prove that he had existed. Another unidentified YBM, dead on the other side of the Anacostia River.

River, hell, thought Strange. The way it separates this city for real, might as well go ahead and call it a canyon.

Strange dropped the newspaper back on the bench seat. He turned the key in the ignition and pushed a Spinners tape into his deck. He pulled out of his spot and drove west. Just a few sips of coffee, and already he had to pee. Anyway, he couldn't sit here all day. It was time to go to work.