

Chapter One:

This Is How We Stay One Step Ahead of the Cops

Kalinda sits in the passenger seat of Smiley's car with a hospital wristband snug around her wrist. The dim glow of the dashboard lights up Smiley's face as he lights a blunt, exhaling a stream of smoke that fills the small space.

"You good?" he asks, his voice low and casual, though his sharp eyes flick toward her.

"I'm fine," she says quickly, though her hands are clenched tight in her lap.

"Keith didn't say much about how y'all got in this mess," Smiley says, taking another drag.

"Why don't you fill in the blanks? Better yet, I want to hear the whole story from your mouth."

Her stomach twists. "I was trying to keep people in line so they knew to fear the Jamestown Crips. Things got a little out of hand. And then we got set up by this Pretty Boy that's new to the school."

Smiley stays quiet, waiting. She knows he wants more.

Kalinda exhales sharply, staring out the window. "It started with this Spanish kid, Mateo. He didn't want to pay tax to enter the cafeteria. Latrell flashed Keith's gun, thinking that would be enough. But instead of backing down, Mateo rushed Latrell and grabbed for it. In the struggle, the gun went off and hit Mateo in the leg.

"We knew how it would look—especially with our reputation—so we bolted to Mickey D's.

Thomas, Desmond, and the Pretty Boy followed later, trying to figure out what happened. We barely had time to come up with a plan before the boi dem pulled up. Jamarcus and Latrell got sucked, so we ran. I knew things were too hot, so I gave the gun to Thomas and Desmond. They had squeaky-clean records, so I figured they'd be the safest to hold onto it until things cooled down.

"The next day, Keith noticed I was skipping school and that his gun was missing. I had to tell him everything. He wasn't happy, but we went to school to get it back. When we got there, Thomas and Desmond told us they had passed the gun to Pretty Boy.

"We tracked him down in the bathroom, but some wannabe Crips had him locked inside. Keith scared them off, and Pretty Boy gave us the gun. But when we got home, Keith checked it—it was fake.

"We got his address from Thomas and Desmond and rolled up on him. He gave us the real gun, but the boi dem came out of nowhere. He set us up.

"Keith and I ran, but they chased us down and fired. I caught a graze on my shoulder. Keith stopped to make sure I was okay, and that's when we got sucked."

"Is that Pretty Boy a Blood?" asks Smiley, keeping his eyes on the road.

"He's not a Crip."

Smiley grunts. "What happened with the cops?"

She exhales slowly. "After I got shot, they took me to the hospital. Social workers showed up, asking all kinds of questions. Keith got arrested, but they didn't push it with me. Too much attention with a minor in surgery, I guess."

Smiley chuckles darkly. "Or maybe they just didn't care enough to make it stick."

Kalinda frowns but doesn't argue. "The social worker said they'd be checking on me. But next thing I know, they're telling me I'm being discharged to my 'next of kin.'" She glares at him.

"Which, apparently, is you."

Smiley smirks, keeping his eyes on the road. "That's right. Keith made sure of that before they hauled him off. I'm your cousin now, officially. You'll be staying with me."

Her jaw tightens. "Why would he do that?"

“These social workers don’t care about that. You’ll bounce around from place to place from one shitty foster family to the next or worst you’ll be in a group home where the other kids will pick fights with you and steal from you,” Smiley says bluntly. “I’ve been through it. Trust me, staying with me is what’s best for you.”

His words sink in, heavy and unavoidable. She shifts in her seat, uncomfortable with the direction this conversation is going.

“But there’s a catch,” he says, pulling into a quiet neighbourhood.

Of course there is.

Smiley parks in front of a row of aging townhouses in Jamestown, the porch light flickering faintly above a worn door. The neighbourhood hums with life, but not the kind found on glossy suburban postcards. Teens linger outside Smiley’s place, some crouched on the cracked sidewalk, playing dice, others passing around a blunt that fills the air with the scent of weed.

Their laughter is loud, but their eyes are sharp, always watching, always alert.

The block tells its own story of resilience and struggle. A couple of elderly women sweep the sidewalk in front of their homes, their brooms moving in slow, deliberate strokes. One stops to adjust a potted plant in her tiny patch of garden, her eyes flicking toward Smiley’s house before quickly looking away. They seem out of place, yet they belong here, keeping quiet tabs on the kids and the chaos.

At the corner, a group of younger children race around the small, rusting playground, their shouts and laughter rising above the faint bassline of distant music. Parents sit on benches, chatting in bursts of Tagalog, Urdu, and Spanish, their voices weaving together the neighbourhood’s diversity.

Kalinda steps out of the car, her eyes scanning the scene. Most of the teens hanging around are Black like her, but there's a mix of faces—Latino, South Asian, Filipino—all wearing the Crips' signature blue somewhere on their outfits. Bandanas tied to belt loops, hats tilted low to shade their faces.

Smiley locks the car with a loud beep, drawing a glance from the group on the stoop. He nods, a silent acknowledgment that sends them back to their dice and smoke. The whole block seems to shift slightly at his presence, a ripple of awareness that he's home.

Kalinda's stomach churns as they walk up the cracked pathway to the door. She's seen this world from the edges, but stepping into it feels like crossing a line she can never come back from.