



Pain was the name on the streets.

It was a name that carried with it enough power that the crooked Narco detectives out of the 13th precinct on Chicago Avenue didn't even attempt to pull Pain over and rob him for what he was worth (possibly millions) because they knew he was paid up to the right people; the kind of people who could force a cop into early retirement with half the pension. Plus, it didn't hurt that he was backed by cold-blooded killers who could go out and make whole families disappear before returning home and fucking the living daylight out of their girlfriends as if it were nothing.

Pain was a name that warranted fear, and that fear churned deep down inside Dr. Jesse Crains' stomach when the bone colored SUV with its dark-tinted windows pulled up to the curb of his mother's two flat brick home, which he had just recently sold, and the back door was thrown open wide like a Venus flytrap.

"Ah yo, Doc, you comin' or what?" A voice said from the interior of the truck.

Jesse wiped his face clean of any perspiration that had formed on his brow. He was twenty-six, less than a year out of Howard, and he didn't like the idea of being called Doctor; at least not yet, the title would start to take six months from now when a cute assistant by the name of Jessica Chan called him Doctor Crain in an almost sensual tone. It would be on that day he would know that the sins he had committed were ones he could carry to his grave without regret.

*It's now or never*, he told himself as he stepped outside the fenced-in yard and shut the gate one last time to his mother's home. He stared up at the building, remembering all the times he and his best friend Bones had sat on the wooden front porch, dreaming of their time when they'd be the young lions running the streets, chasing tail.

"Ah, Doc, I ain't got all day."

*Right, right, get your head in the game, Jesse*, he told himself as he released the gate and stepped over to the open truck.

Inside he found Gator, Pain's right hand man, sitting with a baseball cap dipped to the right over his dreads. He was a charcoal-colored man with a triple overbite. Gator smiled, showing his crooked incisors. "Hop on in," he said, patting the leather seat.

Jesse stole a look at the driver, some piss-yellow light skinned kid no older than 18, then he slid in and closed the door behind him.

"Damn, where the lab coat and all that Doctor Huxtable shit at? You look like you from the streets," Gator said.

*Good*, thought Jesse. But instead he said, "Just because I'm a doctor doesn't mean I have to dress like one. I grew up in these streets, too." It had taken him at least an hour to pick out the jeans and button down shirt, something that would blend with the culture but not enough to attract attention.

"Yeah, but you've been removed from these streets for some time now. They ain't what they used to be."

"I guess that's the evolution of all things."

"Evolution? Shit, Doc, things gone back to prehistoric times. Niggas shootin' up Niggas for no reason. Youngins ain't honorin' nobody. The only thing that's still the same is Pain. We stayin' on top till the world blow. You feel me?"

"I feel you."

They showed each other love by shaking up, their fingers snapping as they parted hands.

"Ah yo, Fin, get us up out of here. Let's head to the spot."

The teen shifted the truck into drive and they were off, speeding down the street into the night.

"I know you saw some fine ass bitches when you was down there in college?" Gator asked, smirking, showing about ten teeth.

"A few."

"A few? Nigga, I heard the stories about those country bitches with asses so fat you nut on one pump."

Jesse chuckled. "Yeah there may have been a few of those down there but I was more into my studies."

"So what you sayin'? You didn't tap none of that country bumpkin ass while you were down there?"

Jesse smiled. "Nah, I hit a few chicks, but you know, I had to keep my mind on my work."

"Okay, okay, I feel you. Business before pleasure. I can respect that."

"So where we headed?" Jesse looked out the dark window at the growing silhouetted landscape. Potholes littered the streets like mined out craters. Whole blocks were either trash-filled vacant lots or dilapidated rat and roach infested sanctums.

"To a party," Gator said, smiling. "Thought we should bless you back into the hood since this being your first night back."

In actuality this wasn't his first night back. He had been back almost a month. The first week was to bury his mother and the remaining three he spent his time making the rounds to the known hustlers, advertising his services, letting it be known that he was, as Kwon, a wannabe big timer, once said: "Cuttin' bricks of coke like slices of cake."

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The truck pulled up to the front of a club called the Pocket. Jesse recalled hearing that another big-timer by the name of Prince Paul owned it.

"We're here," Gator said, "But before we head in I need to check you."

"Check me? For what?"

Gator narrowed his eyes, putting on his killer stare as he grinned. "Come on, Doc, you know how this street thing go."

"I thought we were going to a party?"

"We are but it's best I get this out of the way now then later, you feel me?"

*What the hell, he had nothing to hide.*

He bent down on his knees and turned to face Gator. He raised his arms and waited for him to commence with the pat down. The two men locked eyes as Gator moved his hands up and down Jesse's torso. He dropped a hand down in between his legs and quickly felt up his crotch for a concealed weapon.

"Satisfied?" Jesse questioned.

"One more thing. Lift up your shirt."

Jesse did as asked, but instead he unbuttoned his shirt revealing a green cross and bones tattoo over the left side of his chest.

"We good," Gator smiled. "Time to meet up with the Pain."

They exited the truck leaving the kid at the wheel. At the entrance, two men wearing thick black puffy vests and baggy jeans met them. The men nodded to Gator and then threw open the door.

The VIP section of the Pocket was lit with black lights. Each table at the twelve private booths were shaped like rackets with pool ball themed lights differentiating the table numbers. Caramel, vanilla, and chocolate complexioned women moved about the room serving drinks in scantily clad black and white uniforms while wearing green visors, as if they were bookies taking bets.

Gator led Jesse through a line of hustlers and gangsters seated around the room. Along the way a few hugs, some fist pounding, and a lot of "love" was shared between Gator and his any-given-day rivals. At the end of the procession, far in the back, and flanked by two men with sharp murderous eyes, sat Pain.

Jesse ran his hands down the side of his jeans. His heart was pounding. After all these years of growing up and hearing Pain's name run rampant through the streets, he was finally going to meet the man that was said to have cheated death more than Houdini; the same man who escaped three indictments unscathed because witnesses either went missing or changed their stories. The living legend that ran the streets for over a decade. Pain the merciless.

Jesse, catching the guards glaring at his hands, stopped fidgeting and tried to remain calm, telling himself that Pain was just another test in his already test-filled life.

Gator stepped up to the table first, giving Pain a warm embrace. Then he nodded, gesturing for Jesse to come over.

Pain stood at a mere five feet, maybe even five feet and one inch, but no taller. His eyes were small and his nose was large with

round nostrils. His hair was cut low with waves that wrapped around his head. Adjoining each lobe of his ear was a 2-carat diamond earring.

"This the doctor I been telling you about," Gator said.

"You the doctor? You the bricklayer?" Pain asked, more with his eyes than with his words. Bricklayer was the new word of the week. After Jesse had cut three keys of coke for Jamaican Tommy (who was now dead, killed by Gator's own hands, as it was said on the streets) without diminishing the potency of the product his stock had since risen as one of those Chem boys that knew how to mix, cut, and cook coke like Chef Boyardee.

Jesse nodded his acknowledgement of the epithet and took a seat.

"What are you drinkin'?" Gator asked, flagging down one of the waitresses.

"I don't drink," Jesse said, afraid that if he took a drink now he'd just throw it up.

"Yeah...ummm," Gator said to the waitress. "Let me get two rum and cokes and a sprite for the good doctor."

The waitress fluttered her eyes at the word doctor. She held Jesse's whole being in her captivating stare. He faked a cough to break her spell. He had to keep his head on straight.

As the waitress turned to walk away he thought about his ex-girlfriend Tanisha and how he had told her over the phone, hours after burying his mother, that they were over. When she'd asked "Why?" through broken sobs, all he could say was that he didn't want her to get caught up in what he was doing. When she asked specifically what that was, he hung up.

"You like what you see?" Pain asked, not looking directly at Jesse. He was too busy scanning the room, looking for an unknown assassin.

"She's cute, but not my type." Jesse sat back against the cool cushion of the booth.

"Your type?" Gator said. "My only type is pussy, no matter what color it is."

The two guards laughed.

"So what's your type?" Pain asked, this time turning and looking at him.

"I don't really know. I just know that she's not my type."

"Why's that? Is it because she works in this club or because she's dressed like a Ho? Just because she dressed like one doesn't mean she's a ho. You one of those uppity educated niggas who tend to look down on black women and his own race, huh?"

"No, not at all. I love black women. Actually I love all women, but if you really want to know, she's a little too tall for my taste. I like 'em short and thick."

"That's cool. As long as you ain't on that gay shit. I don't really care what your type is."

The waitress returned with drinks, fluttering her eyes once more in Jesse's direction, but he didn't bite. He had a job to do.

"So I hear you from the hood," Pain said to Jesse after they had been sitting for a bit. "How come I ain't never seen you?"

"I been away at school," Jesse replied matter-of-factly.

Pain may not have known of Jesse's existence, but Jesse grew up watching Pain run their hood. Pain was who everyone wanted to be. He could remember nights when he and Bones would stay up talking and dreaming of the day they'd be like Pain. For it was Pain who threw the nastiest block club parties. It was Pain who gave out turkeys on thanksgiving and presents to little kids whose drug addicted parents (also Pain's customers) couldn't afford to buy them gifts. It was Pain who drove the newest model car or truck a year before it hit the streets. It was Pain who went through and shot up his rival's block, killed No Thumbs Larry, but damn, some shorty on the basketball court got hit with a stray. And it was Pain who held the block down with cocaine and marijuana when there was a drought throughout the city. Kept every hustler working and his family eating; that was better than government aid, wasn't it?

"School, huh? So if you went to school what'cha doin' back in the hood? That education didn't get you a job at one of those big white corporations?"

Jesse bit back a smile. Pain was no one's fool.

"What can I say, I got too much debt and not enough money."

"So you decided to hit these streets. But you know it's dangerous out here for a freelancer. This game will chew you up and spit you out. You sure you're ready for something like this?"

Pain took a sip of his drink. He surveyed the club, taking in every individual, dividing the different posses by their street affiliations.

"I wouldn't be here if I wasn't sure," Jessie finally said.

To their left were five members of the Four Corner Hustlers street gang passing a bottle of Moet between them. Across from the 4's was a group of six Gangster Disciples drinking on a number of libations. Jesse calculated that the two rivals created a high probability of an incident occurring and so he asked, "Are we going to get down to business or what?"

Gator looked to Pain and then looked away. That's when Jesse realized he had made a fatal error. Pain carried the power so they would conduct business whenever he was ready and not before then.

"Gator you check this fool?" Pain asked.

"Yeah, I checked'em. He's clean."

"Check'em again."

"What? Now? Right here?"

"Yeah, right here?"

Gator sighed. "You heard the man, stand yo ass up."

Jesse did as told. Gator went through the routine of patting him down once more; proving to Pain that the good doctor wasn't a snitch.

"Aight, so you clean. That don't mean shit. Give me one good reason why I should work with you?"

Jesse knew that the question wasn't pointed directly at the quality of his work because that was speaking for itself. Why else would he have an audience with Pain? No, the question was more, *Why should I let you live?* And Jesse had only one answer.

"Because I have my own lab."

"Yeah?" Pain said, taking a sip of his drink. "Your own lab, huh?"

Jesse could see the gleam in Pain's eyes. There was no mistaking it. A lab opened up the doors to ecstasy production, Marijuana growing, and if careful, maybe even meth for those college kids every year that came into the city with eyes wide open. Hell, a lab introduced the possibility of the word *limitless*.

"Gator tells me that this is your first night back in the hood. How about we enjoy it a little longer and then we can talk business."

"Sounds good to me," Gator said, flagging the waitress back to their table.

Jesse didn't want to party. He just wanted to do the business and be done, but Pain was calling the shots so party it was.

The waitress, whose name was Kimberly, or Kim for short, or KK as her friends nicknamed her, had been sitting at Pain's table for nearly an hour. If she was working, no one cared. Within that time Gator had stepped off to hit the dance floor, which he seemed to be good at, if you considered he had a woman on each arm, and Pain had ventured to the back to speak to the proprietor, Prince Paul, about some business.

Five minutes ago the waitress had laid a hand on Jesse's knee and now her hand was slowly progressing up his leg as she talked about how cool it must be to be a doctor.

"So do you, like, operate on people?" she had asked, even though he had told her he was a Chemist and not a surgeon.

"No!" He yelled over the loud music; thinking *I've got to get her to understand*. "I work with different types of chemicals to create things. Like weapons." Not that he really worked on chemical weapons, but it was the best example he thought she'd understand.

"Oh, wow!" her eyes went wide. "So you're like some type of rocket scientist."

"Yes," he agreed, hoping that would get her to shut up.

Whatever Kim's mouth wasn't saying her hands were speaking for her. She walked her fingers up along Jesse's leg until finally resting her hand in his crotch.

"You like that Rocket man?" She nudged herself closer and whispered into his ear.

"I don't have time for this," he mumbled.

"Time is on our side tonight, baby." She cupped his penis and scrotum and gently squeezed.

Jesse took a large gulp of his watered down beverage and then he closed his eyes. He could see Tanisha, could feel her awakening his manhood with every stroke, and finally he reached out and took hold of her, tasting her sweet and sour lips. He was lost in her embrace when it dawned on him that these were not Tanisha's lips; hers were long gone, like his mother.

He pushed the waitress away and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

"What's wrong?" She looked at him as though she were a small child hurt by his actions.

He didn't say a word. He stood up, a bit dizzy, and stepped away from the table.

Out on the dance floor he bumped and squeezed his way in-between individuals, doing his best not to step on anyone's white Air Force Ones. He found Gator dry humping some woman's butt as she twirled and switched it from side-to-side. If he didn't know better, he would have thought the two were fucking on the dance floor. It wouldn't have been the first time an incident such as this had occurred in the Pocket.

"Gator," he tapped the man on the shoulder. "We gon do some business or what?"

Gator, still mesmerized by the woman's ass, said from over his shoulder. "Only when Pain is ready." He went back to dancing.

Jesse turned and fumbled back through the crowd. He eyed the waitress still sitting at the table, sipping on some leftover drinks, waiting for him to return, but he didn't. Instead, he turned and headed for the restroom

The black and white tile inside the facilities was an abstract painting with no clear design, at least by Jesse's perception as he stared up at the ceiling trying to rearrange the pieces into a shape.

"You been poppin' too many of them pills, boy?" The old timer stationed at the sink handing out paper towels grinned, showing nothing but three teeth in the bottom of his mouth.

"What?" Jesse asked, stumbling to the sink.

"Yeah, you youngins need to pop 'em just to feel alive. I know." The old timer said, not budging from his stool.

Jesse pushed down on the faucet and then shoved his hands under the cold water. He splashed his face twice then looked at himself in the mirror. His pupils were dilated. He looked as if he had just broken out in a cold sweat. He sloshed his face with water once more.

"If you lookin' to drown yourself you're going about it all wrong." The old timer laughed.

Jesse turned and looked at the man. He reminded him of one of his older cousins that he had somehow grown up calling uncle for some unapparent reason. He turned back to the mirror and did his best to steady his now shaking hands.

What the hell was wrong with him? He hadn't drank any liquor and yet he felt that, if he didn't concentrate on being on solid ground, he might float right up out of this place. The waitress. It had to be her. But why? Had Pain planned to betray him, or even worst...kill him? He wasn't sure. All he knew was that he needed air.

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After pushing his way through the growing crowd, Jesse stumbled out into the night. It was humid and he leaned against an exterior wall to balance himself

The two doormen he had seen earlier at the entrance eyed him and smiled.

He turned away; leaning and brushing his head against the cool bricks of the building as the world whirled around him. He closed his eyes for a second in order to make it stop.

"Get control of yourself," he said aloud as he stumbled out of the parking lot and into an adjacent alley. The stench of a rat's rotting carcass pulled at his nose hairs. He leaned against a dumpster with arms outstretched and thought, *so this is how it's going to go down, killed by Pain in a fucking alley.*

He stared down at the cracked concrete and focused. Beneath the fragmented black tar were cobblestones from a century or two ago. He thought about his mother; how she had worked so hard to see him off to college. He remembered how proud she looked when she held his degree and read his name out loud.

"You're the first," she had said. "The first in this family and the first in this neighborhood to do it in a long time."

He started crying. Remembering that he wasn't supposed to be the first, that he and Bones were suppose to do it together. To be the *firsts* as they had planned. But *bullets don't have no names on them* he had heard someone say, either before or after Bones' funeral. It was that message that had set everything into motion; from him going to college, to graduating with top honors, to securing a job as a chemist back East. But then his mother died from cancer and he was transported back to his neighborhood, back to the streets he had grown up in.

It was on the day of her funeral, while standing on the front porch of his home, that he spotted Pain, Gator and a few others he had known from around the way standing outside a corner liquor store, joking and drinking. He had watched them for close to an hour before he went off to bury his mother.

As the gravediggers lowered her into the ground, all he kept hearing were the words: *bullets don't have no names on them.* And by the time the dirt hit her casket he had remembered his

promise to Bones: that he wouldn't forget where he had come from in order to get to where he had to go.

Jesse shoved three fingers down his throat and damn near touched his tonsils before he regurgitated the contents of his stomach all over the dumpster and alley. Pink chunks of food and slimy bile seeped in-between the cracks and down into the cobblestones.

He wasn't sure if his forced vomiting would relieve him of whatever drug the waitress had slipped him, because they seemed to be already working through his system, but he had a promise to keep and he had worked too damn hard to attain his street cred as an efficient cooker.

"Yo, Doc, you good?" He heard Gator ask at his back.

"Yeah, I'm good." He stood upright and took a deep breath.

"Cool cause Pain ready to do business."

The black Benz, with its bulletproof glass and reinforced steel doors, was known on the streets as Pain's tank. No one knew exactly what it cost, but ask anyone and they'd tell you that it at least cost a nice grip.

At the wheel was Gator, while Jesse and Pain rode in the back.

"He was all throwing up and shit," Gator said.

Pain chuckled. "Got you a taste of KK, huh?"

"I guess I did," Jesse replied, before he brought the bottled water to his lips and suckled down some liquid.

Pain nodded his head then said, "Before we go into business I need to see the lab. I need to know you can break down more than what you did for Jamaican Tommy, you feel me?"

"I feel you." Jesse knew the risk of showing a potential employer his main lab. If it was deemed up to par then any wannabe hustler could smoke him on sight and take all he owned, but he was hoping that Pain could see the potential in him being alive. At least until they saw the lab.

"We need to head north towards the beverage factories out past Lake Street," Jesse said to Gator, who turned the car down a one-way street and headed north.

"Why put the lab in the beverage district?" Pain wanted to know.

"Because it's remote enough that no one's going to ask questions about who's coming and going. Plus, the transportation of various chemicals isn't being scrutinized by the cops as much as if I had setup shop somewhere else."

"I like the way you think." Pain nodded his approval. "If you can do what you say you a can do then we'll be like two peas in a pod."

"Trust me. When you see what I can do you're going to be speechless."

"As long as the product is good and the money's flowing you won't hear a word from me."

It was a bit past 12:00 a.m. when they pulled up to the two-story brick warehouse, which sat alone on a street that had once been populated with factories but were now abandoned lots.

Jesse had rented it from the owner, a Mr. Hassad, who didn't give a damn about what he did with the place as long as he continued to pay cash.

"This the place?" Gator asked, peering through the windshield, searching the abandoned street for other vehicles.

"Yeah this the lab. Told you it was obscure."

"Check it out," Pain commanded.

Gator stepped out of car and removed a pistol from his waistband. He walked around the building, making note of the Pepsi delivery trucks parked a block over in the distribution facility.

He came back to the car and ducked his head in. "It's clean," he said, opening the passenger side door while holding the pistol down by his side.

Pain turned and looked at Jesse. "If this is a setup, you'll be the first to go."

Jesse didn't say a word, just nodded, and exited the car. They all walked towards the entrance before Jesse stopped and pulled a pair of blue latex gloves from his back pocket.

"What's those for?" Pain asked,

"Just preparing. I'm going to be handling some evil shit in there. Better to be safe, right?"

"Yeah, if you say so, you know more about this chemical shit then I do."

Jesse removed a thick chain and padlock from around the handles before pushing the thick wooden door wide open. The interior smelled of mold and ammonia. He led them down a semi-lit hall with Pain behind him and Gator in tow, covering Pain's ass.

They came to a steel door and Jesse stopped and said, "I know yaw don't yet trust me, so Pain how about you grab the door; that way Gator can keep the gun on me. I just want to reassure yaw that I'm on the up-and-up."

Pain pushed him to the side and reached for the door. When he pressed his thumb down on the latch he quickly pulled back his hand. "Fuck!" he yelled, shaking his injured thumb.

"What's wrong?" Gator asked, raising his pistol.

"Pricked my thumb on the door." He kicked the steel frame and an echo resounded throughout the hall.

"Hell, I thought something was wrong." Gator laughed. He was probably the only man that could laugh at Pain's expense and live to tell about it.

"I forgot how tough these old doors can be," Jesse amused. "Let me get that for you." He stepped over to the door and fumbled with the latch. When he finally opened it the scent of formaldehyde, gasoline, and a chemical that left a metallic taste in the air greeted the three men. He flicked on a light near the door and the room was filled with a bright whiteness that half blinded them.

"Welcome to my lab."

The laboratory was a mixture of beakers, test tubes, Bunsen burners, and dark colored jugs covered with skull and bone labels. Two long ten-foot tables had been erected in the corner where a large electronic scale sat ready to weigh product. In another corner sat four steel barrels with the words *Ether* painted in bright yellow letters along their bodies.

"This looks nice, but can you cook?" Pain inquired.

Jesse smiled. "I thought you'd never ask."

He moved over to a four-foot wooden chopping block that sat in the middle of the room and bent down behind it.

"Slowly, Doc," Gator cautioned, raising the pistol and taking aim.

"Relax, Gator, just grabbing a little something that was given to me for a job well done."

He rose slowly, making sure to keep eye contact with Gator as he laid an eight ball of blow down on the table.

"What's that?" Pain stepped back, creating a distance.

"Something from the last batch of product that I cooked up for Jamaican Tommy. You said you wanted to know if I threw down in the kitchen, well now you get to sample it for yourself."

"Nah, not me," Pain said. "Gator, check that shit out, but only a taste."

Gator handed Pain the gun. He had heard that Jamaican Tommy's dope was that pure shit, but he hadn't had a chance to sample it since they had sold the confiscated bricks to some South Side

nigga who paid almost twice the going rate per key, which was \$70,000.

Jesse unwrapped the dope from its saran covering and cut a thin line with a discarded playing card.

Gator smiled, showing his double grin, which so many men had seen before their deaths, then he bent down to the chopping block. Suppressing a nostril, he inhaled the line in one snort.

"Whoa!" He squeezed and chaffed his nose a few times. "That's some good shit."

"Yeah, how good?" Pain asked. Watching Gator try to shake off the effects of the super high.

"Better than what we've got on the streets right now."

Jesse stood back and marveled at Gator's admiration of his product. "See, right out of your own man's mouth. And that was just a sample, now imagine what I could do for your product."

"Yeah, imagine," Pain rubbed his chin.

"Ah yo, Doc, where your bathroom? My nose is beginning to burn a little. I think I snorted too fast."

"Straight out the door and two doors down the hall on your left."

Pain grabbed Gator by the arm. "Don't be too long in there, we got things to do."

"Cool," Gator replied before heading out the door.

"You know, Doc, if we go into business you're going to have to move shop."

"Oh, and why's that?" Jesse bent down behind the chopping board to put away the eight ball.

"Because this place isn't secure and if you're going to work for me you have to work under my conditions. I don't trust nobody."

"Funny you should say that because I don't trust anyone either," Jesse said from behind the chopping block.

"Then I guess we're going to have problems, huh?" Pain walked over and rested the gun on the chopping block.

Jesse looked up and saw the slant of the barrel pointed towards him. He then turned his attention from the gun and looked up into Pain's eyes.

"I don't think there's a need to have problems," he said.

"Good, because I don't like to have problems with people I work with."

Jesse smiled as he stood up and leaned on the chopping block. He made sure to keep eye contact with Pain. "You know you don't have to try and intimidate me. I would have worked with you anyway. Actually, I've been dying to work with you for a long time."

"Yeah, why's that?"

"Because you're Pain and you run these streets."

Pain Smiled. "Well you know how that is...when I come through I bring the Pain."

"That's what I've been told." Jesse pushed himself away from the chopping block and walked over to the barrels of ether.

"First thing tomorrow, Doc, I'm going to have Gator move you to a more secure location and then we gon' get down to moving these bricks. Where's he at anyway? Yo, Gator! I told you not to be taking all day!"

"He most likely can't hear you." Jesse rocked one of the barrels from side-to-side.

"And why's that? What the hell you doin' anyway?"

"The reason Gator can't hear you is because he's dead." Jesse tipped over the barrel. The *booong* sound bounced off the walls as the ether went flowing freely onto the floor.

"Muthafucka, you gon' try and set me up." Pain went to lift the pistol, but for some odd reason his arm wouldn't move. "What the hell?"

"Can't move your arm?" Jesse asked, tipping over another barrel.

"What the hell did you do to me?" Pain barked.

"I'd say the Suxamethonium Chloride is starting to work its way through your blood stream quite well."

"Sux-a-what?"

"Suxamethonium Chloride. It's a neuromuscular blocker that, once introduced to the bloodstream, causes short-term paralysis throughout the body."

“When did you—” Pain lost his train of thought. The answer to his question had now formed on the tip of his tongue. “The door. That wasn’t just some broken latch.”

“Correct,” Jesse said from over his shoulder as he wrestled with yet another barrel. “It was a disposable needle with a concentrated dose of Succinylcholine.”

Pain tried to lift his other hand to grab for the pistol, but his knees buckled and he fell to the floor. He could feel the ether slowly seeping into the fabric of his jeans; it danced along the edges of his fingertips, but he couldn’t move.

“So what’cha want, money? Killing me won’t get chu it.”

Jesse didn’t answer as he popped the small cork on the last barrel and tipped it over.

“You think you’re hard enough to take over this game? Niggas will eat you up the first time they see you on deck. You need someone like me if you’re trying to come into this game and make a name for yourself.”

Jesse paused as if giving Pain’s words some consideration; but in actuality, the fume from the ether, for some odd reason, made him think of Tanisha.

“So what’s it going to be?” Pain could feel his jaw starting to tighten.

Jesse didn’t answer as he walked over to Pain. He stood over the man, looking down into his eyes.

“Nigga do you know who I am? People saw us together, which means my people are going to come looking for you.”

“Then let them come.” Tears were flowing down Jesse’s cheek.  
“And yeah, I know who you are; you’re Pain. You and Gator shot up a block gunning for No thumbs Larry and in the process you killed my best friend, Bones.”

“What?”

“We were just playing ball and then you snatched him from me.”

Pain wanted to say he was sorry but his jaw wouldn’t move and all he could hum was “hm horry. Hm horry.”

Jesse removed the lighter from his pocket and flicked it. The flame jumped to life and wavered like a dancing hula girl. “This is for all the pain you’ve caused me.” He watched Pain’s pupil’s grow wide as he dropped the lighter. He didn’t stay to see where it landed but he was sure it would find the ether either way.

At the door he turned and took one last look at Pain as the blue flames swept up his legs, towards his torso.

Out in the hall, he stepped over Gator’s lifeless body and continued towards the exit. He thought he might have heard the hum of Pain screaming but he wasn’t sure.

Outside, he took a deep breath, and when he exhaled he was weeping. Behind him the warehouse was quickly burning and the smell of charred wood was already circumventing the atmosphere.

He walked off into the night, feeling relieved he had kept his promise. He no longer had to remember where he had come from because it was all burning behind him. All he had to do was to look forward and know that he was headed for a place where there was no more pain.

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Mr. Ball is currently working on teleplays, screenplays, and numerous graphic novels. He's also writing his next novel entitled, "Blue Religion". Some of his works can be read and viewed at [www.alverneball.com](http://www.alverneball.com).