

# Chapter 1

The hot *chai* burned his lips on the very first sip. He put the cup down on the grimy café table, stroking his lips with the tip of his tongue, searching for the start of a blister that he knew was sure to come.

*You've got to stop calling it that. It's been months now.*

Auguste was glad to be back home, on his streets, in *his* element, and in *his* town. New York City was unlike any other place, especially if you were lucky enough to be born here, grow up, work and struggle to survive here; some even die here without having been anywhere else. From as early as he could remember, he had always thought he was going to be one of them, the dwindling few who lived and died here, never having gone beyond its outer borders, confined to its chaotic concoction of concrete, steel, glass and asphalt, not knowing what was beyond, and not really caring either. Those who fit that classification, real originals, had a kind of aura about them, a scent maybe, that emanated from their pores; the die-hard natives like him *knew* who they were, and Auguste could sniff them out. He smiled to himself at the thought of walking up to someone on the street, and taking a whiff.

"Nah, she's Jersey born," or *sniff, sniff*, "yeah, he's an original."

*This*, he realized, as he contemplated the hard cold gray scenery surrounding him, so familiar, so comforting, *was all I knew. And it was always enough for me, until recently. Man, life has some strange twists and turns.*

Well, it was over now and he was back. Auguste tested the liquid in his cup again, *my tea*, with his little finger. Still too hot. It had been difficult to switch back to coffee, the only hot drink, except hot cocoa, that he had ever drunk before—well, before her.

*I really need to get used to coffee again.* The smirks from the waiters when he ordered tea were starting to irritate him, and they would certainly have laughed aloud if he ever called it *chai*. *They probably think I'm from out-of-town or something, just for getting tea, maybe even a foreigner.* That was the ultimate insult to a native. The thought made him chuckle softly.

But the tea gave him a special feeling of comfort, bringing the memory of her closer to him despite the distance between them, and despite their frequent communications, their collaboration on the story; it was somehow a more personal connection, maybe because it was a physical thing he could hold, and taste. The separation pain would eventually pass, he knew that.

Right now he had more important things to do, as he looked down at the big, fat file folder on the table in front of him. Months of hard work were in that brown ragged folder, months of long nights, endless days, writing, organizing and analyzing the bits and pieces of the story that he hoped would get him back on track and give his floundering career new life. Auguste pulled the tattered manila folder closer to him, the work contained in it invaluable.

He checked his watch; it was time to leave for his meeting. He left the now lukewarm tea on the table, half finished, threw down a couple of dollars and went out into his element. As he walked along the crowded sidewalk, he smiled at everyone; they ignored him. *Yup, New York City!* He stepped over the dried trail of liquids here and there that had flowed down the sidewalk on the way to the curb, not quite making it there. The faint odor, still hanging in the air, told him it was either from a dumpster around the corner or some bodily fluid from one of the many nearly lifeless bundles crammed up against the building, torn and almost transparent blankets pulled over them, hoping for some protection from the cold, the ragged soles of their shoes sticking out, the skin of their exposed ankles showing, rough as sandpaper. It was hard on the

eyes and nose, but he accepted it without a second glance. It was his street, his town; Auguste Kensley, a proud original, was thrilled to be back.

As he crossed Broadway, at the south end of Times Square, he weaved around a crowd of tourists that always lingered there, *definitely not originals*; but this time their attention was focused on the sights at the other end of the Square. He knew what they were looking at but couldn't resist a quick glance up. Workers were setting up the New Year's Eve ball drop on top of the One Times Square building, the 1990 New Year's celebration only weeks away now.

He pushed on, shoving his hands in his coat pockets, trying to ward off the frigid December air, the fat manila folder tucked securely under one arm. It had been a long while, their last meeting not going very well, but Auguste was looking forward to seeing Morley Pratte again and showing him what he had written. It had been a particularly difficult struggle to get here, where he was now in mind and body. *If I don't count the last twelve years of struggling, my real transformation only started six months ago.* Auguste shook his head in bewilderment, thinking how amazing it was that so much could happen, how so many things that he thought he *knew* could change, and in such a short span of time.

*That's why I'm here, and on my way to see Morley. Because this is one hell of a story!*

## Chapter 2

*Man, I'm going to be short this month.* Auguste sighed, shaking his head in disgust, as he looked at his bank account statement. He yawned and rubbed his eyes, then pushed it under the pile of other bills, away from view. It was a constant battle, how to pay the rent. And not just on time, but at all. *Time to tighten my belt, again!* He pulled the advertisement section out of the newspaper, the previous day's edition dated June 1, 1978, retrieved from the apartment building trash bin on his way back from work, something he did most nights. He collected coupons, the only recourse to a shortfall, and a frequent morning habit before heading off to work waiting tables at a local greasy spoon from 11am till closing.

His meager bank account frequently dipped into the negative, the overdraft fees sucking out what few dollars were left after all the bills were paid. The vicious cycle of juggling bills and paychecks, waiting until the last minute before past due fees were charged, hoping his check would clear the bank in time, seemed a never-ending struggle. And too often he got it wrong; the check for a bill frequently bounced before the deposit was credited. The tipping point, when the house of cards would finally collapse, nipped at his heels. He was desperate for a fix—anything. But a fix, some magic cure to his “poor” status, was really only a dream; reality usually took precedence over everything else, especially dreams.

Auguste looked for opportunities wherever they might be; it was one of his strengths but he knew there were risks. Temptations were everywhere.

He and Raj, his best friend from childhood, shared their dingy apartment with a third roommate, Collin Nathis. Collin had a friend, a young black kid about their age with aspirations of becoming some kind of drug-kingpin. He was always bragging about how much money he made on the side from his regular job. Whenever he came over for a sale and delivery to Collin he would inevitably try to convince Auguste he should give it a try. “It’s a sure thing man, better than your loser job. That grease train you’re on is headed into the East River man, you dig?”

Auguste was tempted, the battle between desperation and common sense waged inside. He had done a lot of petty crimes growing up, juvenile stuff really, in order to survive but this was in another league. Raj’s warnings helped keep him on the straight and narrow. But he still had no clue what else to do; the feeling of being trapped in his dead-end greasy diner job, living a useless life, was suffocating.

“Man, are you crazy?” Raj said, in a low whisper, when he saw Auguste hesitating at the dealer’s offer. He pulled Auguste into their dark apartment hallway, away from the deal going down between Collin and his supplier in the living room, trying to break the spell of easy money.

“Look, your job, just like mine, *is* a dead-end. He’s right about that. But at least we won’t get 1 to 3 for what we do for a living. We’ll still be goddam poor but we’ll be free, right?”

“Yeah, I know—I *know*,” said Auguste, brushing Raj’s hand off his shoulder in frustration, his anger mostly directed at himself for being tempted. “But I got to do something—what I got right now is not what I want to do the rest of my life.”

“What? You think I want to sit behind that convenience store counter, while I get cursed at by the stinking winos and bums that hang out around my uncle’s business for the rest of my life?” Raj said, his voice low but barely controlling his own anger and frustration. Auguste didn’t answer; they both knew the truth.

“Well then wake-up. We’re both stuck with this crap for now. But don’t make it worse by falling for his big talk. We did a lot of things trying to survive in that shitty hellhole of a

neighborhood we just got out of, but we never crossed the line. At least not *that* far,” said Raj, as he looked over Auguste’s shoulder at the two in the living room, the drug deal still going down.

They both vividly remembered the life they had escaped; it was still sickly fresh in their minds. Just surviving in the neighborhood there wasn’t enough; they also had to navigate in and around the thugs and misfits that swarmed the streets, many of them loosely organized into ten separate youth gangs. Made up of Italian American kids, the gangs preferred the moniker, *The South Brooklyn Boys*—and they harassed Auguste and Raj without mercy. If you couldn’t avoid them or somehow escape their attention, you paid—either with money or a beating. It didn’t help that the police and other authority figures viewed Auguste and Raj like criminals, just because they were poor; the biased treatment only cemented a level of independence, mistrust and defiance into their characters.

“You know it’s all a lie anyway. If he was making so much dough why is he taking the subway on his delivery rounds instead of driving some fancy car? Right?” said Raj, his voice under control now but not waiting for an answer. “It’s because his sorry ass is just as broke as you and me, that’s why.”

Raj and Auguste turned to look down the long dark hallway at Collin and the drug dealer, watching the transaction unfold. It was a strangely comical and sad sight. The bare single 100 watt bulb in their crumbling plaster ceiling cast a bright glare on the tops of their heads and shoulders, the starkness making their fascial features sharp, ragged, like corpses. Collin and the dealer, both about the same height and skinny from the effects of too many cigarettes and drug abuse, both bordering on addiction, flailed their hands and arms about as they argued about the price, the quantity and the quality. Both were oblivious to Auguste and Raj; right now the deal was the only important thing in their tragic lives.

Auguste could see it clearly now; the dealer’s attire was flashy but had no substance, no quality. He wore secondhand gold-plated jewelry, garishly colored scarf and hat with simulated leather boots, silk shirt and pants that weren’t a match in style or cut. The signs of wear-and-tear were clear if you looked closely. The clothes hung on his thin frame, his demeanor expressing a shallow confidence and forced poise.

“Yeah, you’re right, look at him. He’s a joke. Someone’s going to turn him in just for the crime against some fashion sense,” said Auguste. They both burst out laughing.

It was an odd pairing, he and Raj, their respective native cultures like night and day. But as children they looked similar, like cousins, same build and height, with skin tone not white but not dark either, both from mixed blood relationships so their features showed a blend of both parents. But Auguste’s hair was blonde, Raj’s brown, and Auguste’s features were more rugged while Raj’s were softer. That might have been the reason they became friends initially, the similar looks. The real impetus for the strong bond that eventually grew was rooted in their surroundings, growing up in South Brooklyn, the product of broken homes. They found strength in the commonalities of their plights and learned to trust in each other while they slogged through elementary, junior and then high school together. It seemed fruitless though, getting beat down by the rough neighborhood, ignored by family and neglected by society; they faced bleak prospects for any kind of future and not much chance of escape beyond their own streets.

Raj was the only child of a mixed marriage gone sour, his white father taking advantage of a young vulnerable, uneducated Indian woman while on an oil well construction job in Saudi Arabia. After bringing her back to New York City at the end of the contract, he lost interest in her soon after Raj was born. One day, he just left, abandoning both mother and son. They never

saw nor heard from him again. Raj changed his last name to his mom's years later, in defiance and rejection of his father's memory.

Auguste's story was so similar in nature he could have replaced his own name into Raj's story and the outcome would still be the same. His British born father ran off with another woman when Auguste was just five, leaving him without strong guidance and direction, his mom unable to provide it. He and his mom, a Native American, struggled from then on, frequently spending time living out of their 1963 Plymouth Fury—the only thing of value left behind by his Dad—until she could get another job, usually part-time. But that never seemed to last more than a year or two. Raj and Auguste grabbed on to each other for support, no other lifeline in sight, learning to live mostly on their. But along the way, they managed to gain survival skills that would always come in handy anywhere they ended up.

Both of them managed to get jobs after graduating high school; college was never a possibility let alone a long-term achievable goal. Auguste worked at the diner, and Raj for an uncle, who owned a string of Gas Mart's, for the eight hour evening shift five days a week. Together they got as far away from their old neighborhood as their meager paychecks would allow. It wasn't very far, and only possible if they shared the rent for an apartment. Even then they had to bring in Collin, a high school acquaintance, to make the deal work. It wasn't an easy sell to Raj once they found an available apartment.

"Look Raj," said Auguste. "We know he's got his problems, the drugs and stuff, but we don't have any choice. Collin's the only guy we know that has a regular job and we'll never afford the rent without a third person." Raj still looked unconvinced. He was too level headed and cautious, at times, for his own good.

"Sometimes you have to take a dump when opportunity sticks one up your ass," Auguste said for emphasis, trying to strengthen his argument. He liked that sentiment, having heard it at some neighborhood comedy club known for its gritty and coarse view on life; he voiced it whenever the chance arose. This seemed an appropriate occasion.

"And we'll never get out of this rat-hole of a place without him," Auguste said finally, exasperated now; it was his last desperate Hail Mary pass of a try.

"I guess," Raj said, smiling thinly. "Collin is pretty harmless and either one of us could sit on his scrawny ass and squeeze the rent money out of him if it gets to that."

Auguste smiled and nodded, happy that the deal was done. Raj had relented but Auguste knew his heart was not fully committed. It was true though; either he or Raj, with lean and muscular six foot frames, non-smokers and definitely not druggies, were a full foot taller and weighed close to twice as much as Collin. Collin was *not* going to pose any danger to them. But without Collin's rent money, they weren't going anywhere.

And gaining Collin as a roommate wasn't any sort of fix to his financial struggles. Often Collin's dangerous and bad habits were just an additional cause of turmoil and stress for Auguste. Having Collin share the rent just enabled him to stay off the street. The fix, that financial dream of stability, remained elusive.

## Chapter 3

The diner was quiet small so Auguste only had eight tables to wait on, mostly two-chair tables with a few four-chair setups. The six bar stools were handled by the owner, Mickey Russo. Mickey's wife and son worked back in the kitchen and sometimes the daughter came in to run the cashier counter on busy days; it was a family business. She was a dish, but Auguste knew Mickey didn't want just any looser like him, who only waited tables, and especially a non-Italian, to get anywhere near her. He kept his distance; he needed the job.

And it wasn't just the constant threat of ending up on the street homeless, the suffocating job or aimless life that constantly pushed Auguste to find a *better* job, and life. That certainly motivated and encouraged him, but Auguste possessed an innate curiosity about things and people. He was especially good at spotting opportunities and squeezing out any benefit they might offer.

All kinds of people came to the diner where he waited tables; mostly they were people who were on the way down, or on the way up from being down. He liked to try and single out those on the way up. It was a game of sorts, looking for clues in their mannerisms—their attire, attitudes, way of speaking and how much they tipped.

But one customer peaked his interest more for what he *did* while at the diner than any of his personal or behavioral characteristics. He wasn't anybody who would stand out in a crowd; he was average height, slim build, with not unattractive features but his face exhibited a distant, detached look, aloof and unapproachable. Auguste figured he was close to forty and probably been to college, maybe even had a degree. He even looked scholarly with the frameless glasses that he wore while writing, the activity that had caught Auguste's attention in the first place. His black hair, cut in a Beatles mop-top style, made his white skin even starker; whatever he did for a living, or fun, wasn't outdoors. Auguste had already determined he was not on the way down. His attire and mannerisms indicated the guy was holding his own, doing well, maybe even on his way up. Auguste wanted to find out more, especially about his writing.

He came in for lunch about once a week, usually on a Monday or Tuesday. He sat in the back but next to the front window, away from the foot traffic coming and going through the front door next to the cashier's counter. Like clockwork, he ordered black coffee, no cream or sugar, which he nursed for about an hour, puffing on a few Marlboro's while he scribbled on a pad of paper with a pencil, erasing frequently or scratching out lines and words he had just written down. Auguste made sure to keep the customer's coffee fresh and hot.

"More coffee sir?" The customer nodded but didn't look up, and kept writing. Careful not to spill any coffee as he poured, Auguste scanned the customer's notepad.

"\$10K, Tuesday, night drop," then he spotted, "*front company, blackmail, bondage.*"

That was all he could glean from the scribbles before he had to step away; the customer shifted his weight, a clear sign he was uncomfortable with Auguste standing so close. *I know the signals, even when my customers don't know what they are broadcasting.*

It was typical stuff for the customer's writings, stories with names and places, dates and times. There were even names he recognized; he often saw both local and famous people's names. The theme that seemed to show up in most of the stories, or at least certain words and phrases that Auguste could pick out, were frequently about sex, money or dirty deals of some kind. After an hour, he would always slide the writing pad and pencil back into his small briefcase and order lunch, a bacon cheeseburger, heavy on the onions, with fries and coleslaw.

He always ate quickly and left without much delay; his tips were nothing out of the ordinary, the usual twelve to fifteen percent.

Auguste made small talk with him each time he came in, probing for basic information but trying not to appear nosy. He already knew his name was Bruce Holland from the credit card he always used. Auguste managed to find out he lived nearby in an upscale neighborhood; it wasn't upper-class by any means but you had to have a pretty good job to live there. He worked on his own, not in an office, and could choose his own hours. That lifestyle appealed to Auguste, preferring it over the relentless and mind-numbing routine of his own work schedule.

After many months of friendly encounters, Auguste realized Bruce Holland wasn't going to give him an invitation into his inner life unless he was prodded. But his probing it had to be disguised somehow, innocuous and non-threatening. The last thing Auguste wanted to do was disrupt Mr. Holland's routine, he might start going to another diner. Auguste was careful not to give away his intention to squeeze him for more personal secrets, waiting patiently for the right opportunity to question him.

He knew from past experience—a trick he found that worked on his high school administration, in particular the principal—that the best way to get someone's cooperation and put them at ease, make them drop their guard, was flattery. It was virtually guaranteed. The next time Bruce came in, the hour of sipping coffee and scribbling nearly up, Auguste made sure to come over and top off his cup. Mr. Holland hesitated in his writing, snuffed out his Marlboro and grabbed the cup handle for another sip once Auguste was done pouring. His pencil, still in his right hand, was poised to resume writing. The pause was enough of an opening for Auguste.

"Sorry for my interruption sir, but I've always thought you looked familiar. I assume you're a writer or journalist from the pad and pencil that you always carry with you. You've been on TV, right? You must be famous?"

Mr. Holland didn't move or break from his stare at the pad of paper, his one hand still on the coffee cup, the pencil point still pressed down on the paper with his other hand, where it had paused only because of Auguste's interruption.

"Not likely," he said, and brought the cup up to his mouth for a quick sip, then put it down and resumed writing. His head never moved and it was clear to Auguste that his intended message was the conversation had ended. Mr. Holland wasn't going to respond to flattery so Auguste moved away quickly, hoping he hadn't damaged the relationship beyond repair. It was perplexing though. Auguste had never received such a cold reception to what was clearly flattery. And it wasn't over the top, not gushing, just straightforward admiration. Mr. Holland's response wasn't angry either, just matter-of-fact, simple and direct. Auguste took some solace in that.

The next few encounters were uneventful. Mr. Holland followed his usual routine as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened. Auguste was thankful for that but it made him even more curious about Mr. Holland and his mysterious writing. He knew it was going to take careful observing and clever manipulation to crack his shell. It was a challenge for sure, somehow enticing and annoying at the same time. And it wasn't in Auguste's nature to let it go easily.

Mr. Holland made the next move before Auguste had figured out his. On the third visit to the diner, following Auguste's failed probe, Mr. Holland sat at the same table, writing and sipping coffee, paying no heed to Auguste beyond the usual greeting and *thank you* each time his cup was topped off. After an hour, Auguste assumed he would order lunch so he approached one last time to check his coffee. As he poured, Mr. Holland reached into his briefcase and dropped a newspaper on the table, making sure the front page faced Auguste squarely. It wasn't actually a

traditional newspaper; it was the tabloid kind, the type of paper that Auguste rarely noticed. Unsure if it was meant for him or not, Auguste didn't know what to say at first, then spoke anyway.

"Sorry sir, thanks anyway," he said. "I don't really read the newspapers or tabloids. I'm more of a novel kind of reader. But I do write some, mostly in my journal." Auguste immediately sensed he had missed the mark somehow and volunteered more than he should have. He waited, hoping for a positive response.

Mr. Holland looked up just enough for his eyes to peer over the top of his glasses, his writing hand hovering over the writing pad. The smoke from the cigarette clenched between his lips streamed up towards the bottom of his glasses, curling out and away. His facial features remained distant but his eyes expressed hurt mixed with annoyance as Auguste stood there uncomfortably—waiting for a response, perplexed. Mr. Holland's left arm stretched out and his index finger dropped down onto the headline of the main story, then slid down to a name typed in smaller letters below. Auguste leaned over to see where he was pointing at.

"By Bruce Holland, Investigative Freelance Reporter," said Auguste, reading the words aloud. Auguste stood back up, understanding now what he was trying to convey.

"I understand, thank you. Mr. Holland. That's you right?" He didn't want to appear presumptuous or make it too obvious that he already knew his name from the credit card.

"Yes, it is. That's what I do, just so you know. I could tell you weren't going to give up trying to find out, so there it is," Bruce said, lowering the now finished cigarette into the ash tray and giving it one quick twist, the glowing end going black. He took another cigarette from the pack, put it between his lips, and reached for the matches lying next to the ashtray.

The revelation surprised Auguste, not only the discovery of what Mr. Bruce Holland did for a living, that *did* intrigue him, but more importantly that he knew Auguste's intent. Auguste believed he was pretty good at character study, predicting behavior and manipulating conversations, but apparently he had met someone better at it. He couldn't let it go, the opening and opportunity staring him in the face.

"How did you know?"

Bruce sat up straighter now, his head turning to face Auguste more directly. The question seemed to have caught his attention. His eyes again peered over the top of his glasses, squinting to focus on Auguste who was still standing close to the table. But this time his eyes displayed a hint of amusement, somehow enjoying the brief moment of triumph. A wry smile broke across his normally blank features as he pulled the cigarette from his lips, the first break in his façade that Auguste had ever seen.

"That's what I do. Investigate."

After finally revealing what he did for a living, Bruce seemed more relaxed around him. Their conversations were more frequent and friendlier, still only a few sentences strung together at a time, during each writing and lunch session, but slowly Auguste understood the bigger picture of him. He knew Bruce was fully aware of what, and how much, he was revealing; it was intentional and calculated. He wasn't conversing with him because of some magical spell that Auguste had somehow cast over him. As much as Auguste would have liked to think he was in control of the relationship, he wasn't. It didn't matter the reasons for his opening up though, Auguste was sure it could only help him.

The reality was that Auguste had no clue what an "*investigative freelance reporter*" was, or did, other than write. What he wrote, how he wrote, who he wrote for, and more importantly, where the stories came from, were all mysteries to him. Little by little, after a few questions each



week, Bruce described the basic workings of his job, a loose understanding coming into focus for Auguste. He even detected a level of pride when Bruce explained, in some detail, how he *got the goods* on some celebrity, local borough or city official. Auguste started reading all the newspapers, tabloids or rags he could get his hands on, copies already a few days old; he couldn't afford to pay for them when they were hot off the press.

Meeting Bruce gave him a glimpse into a whole new world, the world of journalism, one that had always been swirling around him but never captured his attention. It was just something the rich and privileged people did. Before now, he couldn't even dream of having a real career, especially professional writing, something that might end his daily struggle to stay off the street, his singular focus only on putting aside a few dollars here and there until he had enough to pay the rent, or keep the water from being turned off. At least not until till now. Now, there might be an opportunity, and he was going to do everything he could to make that dream a reality.