

Prologue

The Midnight Crew

Shouts, curses, chaos everywhere as the sergeant marched me upstairs to the third floor of the precinct building. In my twenty-two years I had experienced a lifetime of nasty encounters with the Chicago police. But I had never been here before. This was the Homicide Division. My hands strained in cuffs behind my back. We walked in silence through a corridor of noise. I could hear cries from all directions. Somebody yelled, “The fat one’s throwing up!” and I smelled the sick scent of vomit coming from one of the side rooms. Confused, I turned my head right and left, trying to figure out why they had brought me here. A detective snapped me back to the present, sneaking up from behind and smashing the side of my face with a hollow clank into the cold steel of a locker on the wall.

“Look straight ahead!” he screamed.

They led me into a grim room with a scuffed-up desk, chairs, and a bank of telephones. Long fluorescent tubes cast a harsh yellow-green light. They chucked me down roughly into a chair and bolted my cuffed

hands through a steel hoop in the wall. As soon as I was secured, the detective—a wiry man with a hard face—started screaming at me.

“Who have you been talking to?” His mouth was just inches from me. “Who have you been talking to?”

“I talk to a whole lot of people,” I replied, trying to keep cool and make sense of the question. Wrong answer. The detective punched me in the chest. He kicked my stomach and legs. He smacked my face with his open palms. The thuds from the blows echoed from floor to ceiling. He asked again and again: “Who have you been talking to? Who have you been talking to?”

I had done my share of bad things—criminal things—but there was no reason I should be in this part of the precinct. I did not know what offense he was investigating, or how I could be involved. *Damn*, I thought, *what am I doing in homicide?* Maybe they suspected I was a gang member or something. I had no idea. No idea.

“Who are you talking to?”

“I told you,” I said. “I talk to a lot of people.” Wrong again. The blows thrashed down all over me.

Those first strikes that fell on my body were the start of a long, long night. For me, it was a night that has never ended. I have told the story so many times: to judges and juries, to friends and family, to students and teachers. Every time I describe it, I relive these experiences.

Not a day goes by when I do not think about what happened to me back then—during that dark night of August 25, 1988.

And yet the morning had showed such promise. Dawn came hazy and humid to the South Side of Chicago. I opened my eyes. Birds tweeted in the oak trees outside my apartment. It was a Thursday, a special day. I remember it like yesterday. I woke up filled with the kind of hope I hadn’t felt in years.

It was my day off, and I’d been looking forward to it all week. I

tiptoed down the hall to my son's room and coaxed him out of bed. In the kitchen, I set Ronnie Jr. in his high chair while I fixed our favorite breakfast: oatmeal with raisins and Cap'n Crunch. Then I sat up on the tabletop while he ate and chattered to me about his birthday. He'd be turning three in a couple weeks and the party was the only thing he had any interest in discussing. My girlfriend, Tiffany, joined us in the kitchen. Our relationship was coming to an end—at least in my opinion—but she was pregnant again and hoping that a second baby would draw us back together as a couple.

Apart from my feeling of hopefulness, it was an otherwise normal morning. I felt the typical cares that I experienced at the beginning of every day: fatherhood worries, relationship stress, and the uncertainty of surviving. But still I had a sense from the start that it was somehow different.

After eating I got set to go out on my regular hustle. I took my time getting ready, laying out a pair of parachute pants and a baggy linen shirt while brushing my hair. I peered through the front door. South Aberdeen Street looked as it always did. Although the streets all around us were filled with litter and decay, our block was pretty tidy, thanks mostly to my grandmother's insistence that everyone in the family did their bit. When I was a kid she had made sure I cleaned the gutters and mowed the lawns. Now that I was older I'd give younger family members a couple bucks to do these chores for me. I checked both directions for trouble. Nothing seemed out of place. No suspicious cars idling, no strangers loitering on the corner. I knew that later in the day neighborhood life would pour from these homes out into the open, but for now all was quiet.

When I stepped outside, the temperature was in the mid-seventies, with a slight breeze. Sunlight gleamed like money off the chrome grille of my Cadillac Eldorado. I climbed in and cranked up the new Keith Sweat album so high that people could hear me coming from two blocks away. So far the summer had been fun. A lot of fun. Pool parties, women, clubs. It had been a nonstop bash. And I stood atop my game. All day and all night, the streets of the South Side—trash piles, broken glass, boarded-up windows, and all—were my domain.

When I say my "regular hustle," what that meant was seeing girls and selling cocaine. Dealing drugs was the path I took to support my family. I was not a kingpin or anything. Most of my business was local. But I had graduated from selling on the streets to the next level in the industry. Customers would come up to a couple dope houses I rented and buy \$10 and \$20 bags from my employees there. I was rarely even present when these transactions happened. This lessened the risk. It made what I was doing seem almost like a real business. Maybe that was why so many people I knew had gone into narcotics and made a lifestyle out of it. They joined one of Chicago's prominent gangs—the Stones, Vice Lords, Latin Kings, or Disciples—and turned cocaine into a career. That wasn't going to be me. I never affiliated with a gang. For me it was get in and get out. I had friends and family on both sides of the gang wars, though, and since I had cousins belonging to all of the rival crews, everyone tended to leave me alone.

When you're a teenager, and you're getting this money, you feel untouchable. You feel like, *they can't fuck with me*. In fact, I used to always say just that. I had never been locked up. I had never even seen the inside of a police station. Then I turned twenty-one and shit got hectic real quick. It got really real. In the 1980s everybody was coming up dead somewhere. If it wasn't in a garbage can, it was in the river. If it wasn't in the river, it was in a car. And every one of them that you heard about coming up dead was a dope dealer. I was getting antsy. Police had busted into my house in June and discovered seven hundred grams of cocaine. That was troubling, and I knew I was probably looking at several years behind bars. But it wasn't the cops who scared me most.

Dudes in the neighborhood knew I had money on me—and that played heck on my mind. My nerves were gone. I was taking all sorts of precautions. I never let Ronnie Jr. or his mom ride in the car with me, just in case someone tried to shoot me down. I had been robbed at gunpoint in a darkened hallway and that made me paranoid. I didn't feel safe in my own house. Now, if I got home and saw that the rooms were dark, I would call from my car phone and have someone turn on the lights before I ventured inside.

I was telling myself constantly that it was time to call it quits and get out of the dope game. I had one son, and a second on the way. I had bought Ronnie Jr. a bike with training wheels. I wanted to be there to teach him how to ride it around the block. I knew I'd probably be away for a little while on that cocaine bust, but because of that I was trying to get things in order. I was trying to get it so my family would be all right while I was away. I was trying to live. And on August 25 I was finally ready to make the change.

That afternoon, my mom and I had a serious sitdown. I told her "I'm through with this drug stuff." I had a little more product to sell—about half a kilo's worth. I was going to get rid of my stash and be done with it. This was the plan that I had been thinking about all morning; this is why I thought this one particular day was going to be a milestone in my life.

The building where my mom lived, just a block away from us, had a ground floor storefront, which we had turned into a videogame arcade called the Game Room. We had six or seven machines, Pac-Man, Ms. Pac-Man, Galaxy, and a few more of the latest hits. And business was booming. Because we owned the machines, all the quarters that went into those slots belonged to us. And, since we were around the corner from a grammar school and a karate studio, we were making more than \$1,200 a week. That afternoon my mom and I sat on her front porch and discussed a proposal to expand. If we closed the Game Room for about a month for renovations, we knew that we could earn significantly more money for the family. Soon we would be selling popcorn, snowballs, ice cream, and candy. Our income was going to skyrocket. I imagined myself owning twenty Game Rooms in a couple years' time. This was my plan to change my life. This was the vision that was filling me with hope that day. And, at the very least, even if I did a few years in the penitentiary, I was getting my ducks in a row so that Ronnie Jr. and the coming baby would be all right while I was away. Just thinking about it calmed my nerves.

As my mom and I were talking, a blue-and-white police car pulled up. Officer Dowling, the local beat cop with whom I was all too familiar, rolled down his window and called me over.

"Ronnie," he said,

"where you been?"

"I've been in the house."

"You staying out of trouble?"

"I'm always out of trouble," I replied.

"Good," he said, and drove off.

I didn't think nothing of it at the time. Police harassment was an everyday occurrence for people in my neighborhood. Because I had a high profile, I probably dealt with them more than most of my friends did, but I wasn't particularly concerned. The police didn't scare me. I said good night to my mom and called Tiffany to tell her to turn the light on—I was coming home. She asked me to stop in at the corner store to pick up a gallon of milk and a package of cookie dough. Evening had come as I walked to the shop. The air was cooler. I felt more at ease than I had in weeks. This was the time of day when the whole hood came out to socialize. Aromas of fish fry and fried chicken hung in the air. Every night that summer the street had just come alive around sundown. The adults would have a gossip about who was doing what with whose husband. My

uncles would come over to drink beers and the neighbors would stop by to sit on the porch. The little kids might be playing “one, two, three, red light,” or “catch a girl, kiss a girl,” or else zipping around on their go-karts. I would open the trunk of my car, turn up the speakers of the radio, and tie on my roller skates. The street was paved flat enough to serve as a perfect rink, and I could skate my ass off. Big wheel, crazy legs, the shuffle, the nutcracker—I had all the fancy moves. This was the summer. And it was beautiful.

Before I got to the store, though, Officer Dowling rolled up on me a second time. He asked some meaningless questions, and I figured he was just giving me trouble. Then, while I stood by the side of his cruiser, another vehicle—a burgundy Oldsmobile Cutlass—skidded to a stop next to us—an unmarked police car. The driver told me to come over, and I walked from one officer to the other. “Somebody just pointed you out for auto theft,” said the man in the Oldsmobile. “That’s impossible,” I answered. “If I had done something wrong, would I be standing here talking to a uniform in a squad car?” The whole idea was laughable. “And anyway,” I continued, “I don’t need to steal no car.”

But the driver wasn’t laughing. Instead, he slowly and deliberately took out his gun and rested it on the windowsill. The barrel was aimed directly at me. Then he stepped out of the car and started to clip handcuffs on my wrists. By this time, Tiffany, my mother, my grandmother, and my aunties, had all come down the street to see what was going on. They were worried, but I was calm. I knew that I hadn’t stolen any cars. This was a misunderstanding that we could easily clear up. As the sergeant conducted me into the back seat of his vehicle, I turned to reassure my family.

“I’ll be back in forty-five minutes,” I hollered to them.

I had lost track of the hours. But a whole lot more than forty-five minutes had gone by—and yet here I was, still chained to the wall in the Area 3 precinct house. I had plenty of time to think back on my interactions with the police. I had known them my whole life. Or at least I thought I had. They always fucked with us. They would say some shit. I would say shit back. Harassment was a constant fact of life. But here in this room—this was something else. The interrogators did everything they could to baffle and disorient me. They left me waiting for hours. Sometimes I squinted into bright lights; at other points I sat by myself in absolute darkness. Then the officers would crash into the stillness with a terrifying outburst of violence. The physical pain was excruciating. But the uncertainty and confusion—that was torture. The hard-faced detective—his name was Michael Kill—stormed in and out of my room repeatedly over the course of several hours. Each visit resulted in blows and kicks. The third time, he returned with another man. They were a mismatched team. Whereas Kill was lean, thin-faced, and blond, the second man was fat and ruddy with a full head of red hair. I knew by the white uniform shirt he wore

that he was a high-ranking officer in the Chicago Police Department, maybe a sergeant. That was all I could tell of his identity, however, because the first thing he did upon entering the room was remove the nametag from his chest.

No questions this time. Kill came at me again. He punched me in the left side of my face and I went down. With my hands still cuffed to the wall behind my back, I was completely helpless when I fell. Contorted half-on and half-off the chair, my shoulders were in agony. As I lay twisting there Kill kicked me in the chest, the midsection, the testicles, the ribs. The fat commander clambered up on top of the desk and began stomping me in the back. His heavy shoes thumped into my ribs and spine. It went on for a matter of minutes. Then—just as suddenly as they had entered—the two men disappeared, leaving me alone again, bewildered and gasping painfully to breathe.

Only later—years later—would I finally discover the name of that fat man who was so determined to keep his identity a secret. Today, anyone who has read a newspaper in the past decade is likely to have heard of him. But back in 1988, as far as the general public knew, Jon Burge was just another Chicago cop.

Born—like me—on the South Side, Burge had served with distinction in Vietnam before returning home to be promoted through the ranks of the police department. By the time I encountered him, he had already been a detective for sixteen years. From 1981 until 1986, he led the Violent Crimes Unit in Area 2—a vast jurisdiction covering many of the city's African American neighborhoods. In January 1988—only seven months before I was brought to his precinct—he was promoted again, to command the entire detective branch in Area 3. Wherever Burge went, his units amassed impressive records for speedy arrests and high conviction rates. But other patterns also emerged, if only anyone cared to search for them: accusations of violence, racism, torture, and coerced confessions. In 1988, these were just whispers. Soon, though, they would emerge into open court. Revelations about Burge and his men would help spark a popular movement against mass incarceration and the death penalty. In Chicago, a town with a high tolerance for—and a rich history of—scandal, this would become the most notorious outrage in a generation. Lives have been ruined. The total costs to the city can only be estimated, but the victims have already been awarded over \$100 million. And even these costs do not include the funds wasted prosecuting and incarcerating innocent people, litigating abuse cases, and defending Burge, his accomplices, and his protégés. The psychological and emotional expenditures go far beyond currency, and they can never be tallied—let alone compensated.

At the latest count—and the number keeps rising—120 victims have come forward. The earliest incidents dated from 1972, the very start of Burge's career as a detective, and they continued until 1993,

when he was dismissed from the force. Each case differed in its details. Some victims were identified by witnesses. Others, like me, had a reputation in the neighborhood. A few found themselves targeted in retribution for protesting police activities. Many just chanced to be in the wrong place at a very bad time. But a crucial similarity endured. In every case—without a single exception—the victim was black. Detectives routinely employed fists and boots against their prisoners. Racial epithets and verbal assaults just rolled off their tongues. Burge and his men used whatever lay at hand to perpetrate their enhanced interrogations: people in custody were suffocated with plastic bags, burned against radiators, pistol whipped, had gun barrels placed in their mouths, took beatings with baseball bats and flashlights, had their fingers vised in bolt cutters, and felt nooses tightened around their necks. Burge's favorite implement was an electrocution device he had used against enemy prisoners in Vietnam. A rewired telephone unit called the Black Box, it was employed on dozens of victims who received electric shocks all over their bodies: ears, chest, armpits, testicles, and penis.

Within the police department some referred to the Area 2 and Area 3 detectives as the “asskickers.” But Burge and his team had a different name for one another. They called themselves the Midnight Crew.

“This is what you did,” Detective Kill sneered at me, as he shuffled the photographs around on the desk. “Nigger, we know you did this.” Hours more had slipped away. The ordeal had destroyed any sense of time. I had no idea how long I had been here, or whether it was day or night. Despite all that I had been through, I still had only the most general notion about what crime the homicide squad was even investigating.

Now that changed.

I glanced for an instant at the pictures on the tabletop and turned away in horror: they were too gruesome to look at for long. The officer clutched my head and forced it down, making me stare at the photos. I saw crime scene snapshots of dead, disfigured bodies—the charred and burned remains of two young women and three little babies.

“Nigger,” Kill sneered, “we got you on record saying you did this.” With a sinking feeling, I suddenly understood the depths of my trouble. The mystery of my ordeal—the secrecy and torture—finally snapped into focus. They wanted me for a mass murder.

Even for Chicago, the crime had been brutal and tragic. A month earlier, firefighters had discovered these five corpses inside a burning bungalow on a quiet street in the Mexican area of Gage Park. One of the women had been beaten, and the children were smothered with pillows. The fire had been set by the assailant in hopes of destroying the evidence of violence. It was a sensational case, and Burge was under strong pressure to find the perpetrators. The women were mothers,

hardworking teacher's aides, popular and friendly with neighbors and coworkers. There was another factor, too. One of the victims was the daughter of a Chicago cop.

The story had drawn some media attention, but in those days I was not exactly up on current events. I had never heard of these murders until the moment when I found myself confronted with the pictures. I never spent time in the neighborhood where the crime had occurred. In the drug business, I'd had no contact with any Mexicans. But now I understood what the police were claiming I had done. The realization that I was being charged with five murders should have been terrifying. Or, if I was thinking clearly, it might have even felt like a relief—since I knew I was innocent of the charges. But it was not like a normal encounter when someone comes straight up into your face and accuses you of something you didn't do. In that situation you would say, "I don't know what you're talking about." My thought processes were so jumbled by the beatings that this knowledge just added to my bewilderment. Confused isn't even the word. Mentally and emotionally I was not even in the room anymore. I was totally someplace else. I was in the land of *What the fuck is going on?* I sure knew it was not a joke though. Hell no, it was not a joke. And though I now knew my supposed crime, I still had no idea why the detectives thought I was the perpetrator.

Later on, I got my first hint of their case against me. Detective Thomas Byron, the big officer who had brought me into custody, entered the interrogation room. Playing the role of "good cop," he asked if I was OK and offered me something to eat. I told him I wanted to know what evidence they had on me. He brought out the case file. My hands were still cuffed, so he set the papers on the desk and turned the pages. My one idea was to scan the document in order to see the name of the person who had fingered me to the detectives. When I did see the name—Willie Williams—I almost laughed. Willie was an acquaintance, at best—a neighborhood guy whose sister was dating my cousin. In the statement, he claimed that we had talked over the telephone, and that during several of these conversations I had bragged to him about committing the murders.

"I don't know why this dude told you this," I said. "I don't socialize with him and he don't come to my house." I asked Byron if I could use the phone to call my lawyer. With a smile he walked over and lifted the receiver. Then the smile vanished. He unplugged the handset from its cord and smashed me with it on the side of my head. "Do you hear ringing now?" he asked, and thundered out, switching off the lights as he left.

Hell yeah, I heard ringing. Sitting there in the dark I heard a lot of ringing. Over the course of hours the police had gradually moved forward with their plan to break me down. They had starved me and refused to let me use the toilet. I was injured and disoriented. I

knew they wanted me for murder, and now I had learned who their informant was. Only one step remained: confession.

Now it was just a matter of time. I was moved into a holding area and then to a second room. During these transfers I saw that other people were involved. My cousin Eric Wilson was there. He was “the fat one” who had been vomiting the previous night when I had arrived in the police station. I was allowed to catch a momentary glance of Marvin Reeves, my grandmother’s godson, who was in a different interrogation room and had a massive black eye. It was morning. I could see the sunlight through the window. It had been maybe twelve hours and I hadn’t had a scrap of food or a sip of water.

“We have ways of making niggers talk,” boasted Detective John Smith, the next officer to enter. “I’m going to introduce you to the telephone book and the blackjack.” He then placed the phone directory on my skull and wailed on it with his nightstick. Oh my God, it hurt. It felt like he was trying to knock my brains into my neck. He jabbed me in the gut with the baton until I rose to my feet, and then he shoved it between my legs and ground it into my testicles, lifting me onto my tippy toes and almost into the air with the force. “Admit you spoke to Willie Williams,” he commanded. “I never said this shit to him,” I repeated. “I don’t know why he’s lying to y’all. He’s a damn liar.”

The detectives appeared and departed. If their tactics differed slightly they all showed the same rage. Each one made the same threat, in so many words, *You will say what we tell you to say*. After an entire night in the police station, I hurt everywhere. My testicles were swollen and my ribs ached with every breath. When the police finally did let me use the bathroom later that morning my urine was red with blood. But the officers at Area 3 were experienced in the art of torture. They knew how to mess up someone real bad without leaving any incriminating wounds. Too-obvious bruises and broken bones could jeopardize a case. That’s why Kill had used open-palm slaps when he hit my face, why Burge had kicked me in the back, why Byron had smashed the phone on the top of my head, and why Smith had employed the telephone book to reduce the visible damage from his nightstick. The beatings would worsen. Only two paths existed: they were going to torture me to death, or I would have to confess to this terrible crime. *You will say what we tell you to say*.

When the assistant state’s attorney first entered the room I hoped he might be a lifeline to the outside. That was naive. The prosecutor—his name was Mark Lukanich—asked if anyone had read me my rights. I told him they had not, and he began with the formalities—fifteen hours after my arrest.

“You have the right to remain silent,” Lukanich informed me.

Is that a fact? I thought. *Someone should tell that to Detective Kill.*

“Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law.

“You have the right to talk to a lawyer and have him present with you while you are being questioned. If you cannot afford to hire—” I wanted to interrupt him right there. I did have a lawyer—a longtime family friend, who had represented me before—and I was frantic to speak with him. I told Lukanich my attorney’s name and telephone number and asked him to contact the man for me. He promised to look into it and left the room.

Detective Kill came roaring back in moments later, shouting, “Nigger, you just don’t know how to do what we say to do.” He smacked and slapped me around. He said he knew that we did it—Marvin and me. Everyone knew we did it. Over and over, he issued the same dark threat, “We have ways of making niggers talk.” Whatever the laws of the state, inside Area 3—or any precinct worked by the Midnight Crew—different statutes were enforced. “You don’t have but two rights when you come in here,” Burge liked to tell his victims, “to confess or get your ass kicked.”

I finally agreed to speak to the prosecutor again, but then when Lukanich came back, I told him, “I don’t want to talk to you. I—I want to talk to my lawyer.” He left. And here came Kill. “Everyone knows you did it,” he shouted, punching me again and again. “We have ways of making niggers talk.” It seemed like they could go on forever. But, I’d had enough.

“All right,” I sighed, “I’ll talk to him.” This time, when Lukanich returned, Kill stayed with us. Exhausted, desperate, aching and throbbing, and no longer able to keep up the fight, I finally said, “I’ll do whatever you want.”

This was when I gave my so-called confession. Here’s how it went. Detective Kill stood behind me and told the entire story directly to Lukanich. According to the narrative he created, Marvin and I had murdered the women because of a drug debt. The figure he concocted—\$1,200—would be cited by newspapers as evidence of our cruelty. Doing the math, reporters would claim that we had valued our victims’ lives at just over \$200 apiece. Sitting across the desk, the prosecutor dutifully wrote it all down on a piece of paper. All I did was agree to it. Whatever Kill told me to say, I said it. The attorney never asked me about any particulars. All he asked was “Is this how it happened?” And I just said *yes, yes*. “Anything else?” No. The entire statement came from Kill. I did not add a single detail, and I did not object to anything. I never said, “I don’t know.” I never said, “I don’t remember.” During this whole time the only two words I ever said were “yes” and “no.”

I had no choice but to confess. Once I realized that the prosecutor and the police were working together, I knew that there was no other way out. Even as I said “yes, yes” to all of Kill’s outrageous lies, I was already thinking about the future. I couldn’t imagine this statement ever holding up in court. Long before we even reached the trial, I

thought, the arraignment judges would see my wounds and set me free. The intake doctors would examine me and testify on my behalf. The entire system—I truly believed this—was designed to protect me from the actions of the likes of Burge and Kill. It was designed to protect the innocent and punish the guilty. The moment I escaped the clutches of the Midnight Crew, my “confession” would be seen for what it obviously was—a bunch of lies.

When the prosecutor finished scribbling, he passed the document across the table for me to see. There were large block letters written across the top that said, “Statement of Ronald Kitchen.” Beneath the heading a paragraph read, “I understand I have the right to remain silent. Anything I say can be used against me in a court of law.” I signed my name beneath those words. And I signed again on the bottom left-hand of the page. I signed it on page two. I signed it on page three. I signed every page of the confession. I didn’t even bother to read it. I knew what it said. Then the state’s attorney signed it, and he and Kill left. Drained, bruised, starving, and exhausted I found myself alone.

The life I had led up to that moment was stolen from me by Jon Burge, Michael Kill, and the Chicago police. Precious God-given years were taken away due to a lie that strangers told about me. Responsibility for what happened—to me, and to scores of other survivors—does not rest with the Midnight Crew alone. Widely held assumptions about poor black men and upstanding police officers made this possible. Prosecutors and politicians, including at least three mayors, abetted a conspiracy of silence. Because of who I was, and the way I looked, others were eager to believe that I was a monster and a murderer. Few would show any interest—at first—in listening to my version of events. If the whole truth of what took place was told, it would implicate them all.

I bear witness to this history. When I speak, it is not only for myself, but for other survivors and victims of a society that incarcerates one-in-three black men and where black men and women can be gunned down by police, who get a pass by saying, “I feared for my life.” All of our lives other people have tried to define us, whether it was the teachers, social workers, or sociologists on the South Side or the lawyers and journalists involved in my cases. It has taken time for me to find my own voice. We have lots of stereotypes on our back, and I have suffered for the assumptions others have made about me. I love to prove people wrong, but I get tired of having to prove myself over and over again. I know my self-worth, and I don’t have to prove a thing.

The time has now come. I am Ronald Kitchen. This is my story.