

Losing is Winning: Volume I

Chapter 1: The Crown Among the Rubble

The crown never starts on the king's head.

Sometimes it's buried beneath the rubble of a broken world, waiting for someone bold-and wounded enough-to dig it out.

My name is Brandon Michael Spencer, and the Gerson taught me everything. Not the kind of lessons you get in a classroom. No, the Gerson had its own curriculum: survival, silence, pain, and persistence. It sat on Hassel Avenue like a secret the city tried to forget-a pocket of the world where lives moved fast, dreams died young, and every corner whispered a warning. That was my school, my block, my crucible. That was where the boy who would one day wear the crown came face to face with the rubble.

I was the youngest of my family, the final child in a line of lessons my parents had already spent years learning. But even as the baby of the house, there was nothing soft about where I came from. Hassel Avenue didn't play favorites. The streets didn't cradle you-they tested you.

I remember it like film on rewind. Hot summer days where the pavement seemed to pulse with heat. The scent of fried food mixed with the metallic twang of spent bullets. Laughter from porches, the occasional sound of a basketball pounding asphalt, and always-always-an edge of danger in the air, like something might go wrong at any second. And often, it did.

I was maybe seven years old when I saw it happen.

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The ice cream truck rolled in slow, music ringing sweet and nostalgic, like a lullaby in a warzone. I remember clutching a crumpled dollar in my hand, the sun so bright it made the truck shimmer like hope. Then, in one fast blur, that hope shattered. A man stormed the window, gun in hand, and pistol-whipped the vendor before demanding the cash box. I froze. That was my first lesson in economics-the kind they don't teach in school. Money is power. Power can be taken. Innocence is optional.

Despite it all, I was always... different. Not better. Just wired in a way that made me believe in more. I was optimistic-even in a place that tried to beat that out of me.

While other kids found outlets in smoke or steel, I built bicycles and skateboards in my backyard, using whatever parts I could find or beg off neighbors. That little patch of cracked concrete behind our house became a laboratory of escape. I didn't know it then, but those bikes weren't just toys-they were metaphors. I was building ways out.

On our block, you had to earn your space. Lonnie and Eddie-twins with fists like bricks and loyalty that ran hot and cold-were my closest friends and, at times, my fiercest enemies. One day we'd be sharing a bag of chips, the next day swinging on each other like the world had room for just one of us. But that's what friendship meant in the Gerson. Love didn't always look like kindness. It looked like surviving each other.

Isaiah, on the other hand, had a gentler soul. We'd sit on the curb for hours, talking about nothing and everything. Sometimes we'd ride bikes until the streetlights came on. He lived a few doors down, and in a place where most kids wore masks made of toughness, Isaiah wasn't afraid to just

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be human. That made him rare.

On one side of our house lived a caregiver, the kind of woman who brought soup when you were sick and always had that mom energy-even when she wasn't yours. On the other side lived the mechanic, hands always stained with grease, music always playing, always working. Watching him taught me that working with your hands builds more than engines-it builds dignity.

And then there was the basketball hoop-bolted into the side of our house, slightly bent, with a rim that rattled every time the ball kissed it. That rim taught me rhythm, repetition, and resilience. It's funny. People think discipline starts in school. Mine started with that hoop. Every miss was a lesson. Every swish was a win I didn't have to explain to anyone.

My parents? George and Clarice Spencer were warriors disguised as workers. They came from Mississippi-raised in dirt and dignity-and carried that legacy north. My father, stoic and strong, worked long hours with his hands, came home tired but dependable. My mother, sharp-eyed and sharp-tongued, ran the house like a captain steering through chaos. They were exhausted, but they were excellent.

They didn't raise us with riches-but with values.

Things like:

"A man's word is worth more than his wallet."

"Don't let your surroundings decide your story."

"Pain will visit, but it doesn't have to move in."

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Those weren't just sayings. They were scripture in our home.

I remember once asking my mother, "Why don't we move somewhere safer?"

She looked me dead in the eye and said, "Because this is where we build strong."

And she was right.

Even with trauma shadowing every corner, there was structure. There was order inside the disorder. You learned to read the street like a map. You knew which houses were safe. You knew when to walk fast and when to disappear. That kind of learning doesn't come from books. It comes from needing to stay alive.

Looking back now, I realize that my childhood wasn't just about struggle-it was about strategy. Just like chess. There were pawns all around me-people moving the same tired moves, over and over. But I was studying the board. Watching. Waiting. Learning.

Every broken window, every gunshot at night, every fight in the yard, every act of kindness from neighbors who had little to give-those were all moves on the board of my life. They didn't make me bitter. They made me better.

I didn't know it then, but the crown I wear now-the one that sits on the cover of this book-was already forming back then, somewhere in the cracks of Hassel Avenue. Not because I avoided pain. But because I learned how to repurpose it.

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That's why losing is winning.

Because every L I took in those streets?

It became a lesson.

Every loss was a lit fuse.

And every time I thought I'd been buried, I was actually being planted.