

NFL TO PRISON CELL

Overcome Adversity and Elevate Beyond Bondage to Mental and Physical
Freedom

A MEMOIR



WENDELL L. BROWN SR.

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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to those who love me most,
my Mother, Antoinette Brown, and my uncle, Raymond Brown Jr.
Because of you I AM and without you I wouldn't be me,
nor would I be
FREE!!
I LOVE YOU TO LIFE!!

Chapter One

GREATNESS IN A BOTTLE

I expect to be great. I expect to do what hasn't been done. I expect to provoke change.

-Deion Sanders

September 24th, 2016

A Chinese mob surrounds me outside the bar. From all sides come punches, kicks, spitting, and screaming in a language I do not understand. Fists and feet turn into bottles, chairs, and makeshift weapons of all kinds. At 6'0", I tower over some of them; at 235 pounds I outweigh many of them by half; but I am still no match for a sea of angry wolves intent on devouring its prey.

The police arrive. *Finally*, I say to myself, *Finally, the beatings are over*. But I am wrong. After the police handcuff my hands behind my back, the assault continues, as viciously as before, but now I am unable even to raise my arms to block their blows, however inadequate that cover had been. The officers simply watched what transpired in front of them, doing nothing to stop the onslaught, and soon I found out why.

The police muscle me into the back seat of their vehicle, and two officers sit on either side of me. The officer to my right then tries to finish what the mob of irate citizens had started. Within the confined space, while I sit handcuffed and defenseless, he beats me with his club on my head, shoulder, stomach, anywhere else he can reach. If I think the officers in the front seat might have mercy on me, I am wrong again. The car begins to move, and the man in the passenger seat turns and faces me, his eyes wide and bright with exhilaration. The driver, as well, watches me from the rearview mirror, even more excited than his partner. *This can't be real*, I think. *This isn't happening*. But it is. As the driver speeds through the streets of China toward some unknown destination, the four officers say nothing I can understand. The only sounds inside the car I can recognize are my grunts of pain, the smacking of the club against me, and the breathing of the officer who swings the club, heavy and labored with the effort.

The police car stops in front of a building on a dark street, the only light coming from the neon lettering on the front of the building. I don't read Chinese and even if I had been able to, I would still have no idea where I am. Where have they brought me? What lies on the other side of the door? Will I be safer in there, or is it even worse than the ride over here, being beaten the whole way? Trying not to panic, I thought, *Where the hell am I? What is about to happen next?*

The officers force me out of the car and through the front door of the building. As I am pushed down the hallway, I pass several other uniformed officers and handcuffed civilians, so I gather that I am in a police station. Not a pleasant place under the best of circumstances; a stranger in a foreign land, surrounded by hostiles with clubs and guns, reeking with animosity, it is terrifying. Judging from my treatment on the way there, how abandoned and unkempt the police station looked from the outside and within, I'm not sure if I should be relieved or even more frightened by my current location.

The glares of other officers and criminals weigh heavily as I am pushed through the halls. My escorts throw me into a room the size of a handicapped bathroom stall, rearrange my handcuffs so my arms are in front, chain me to the desk I am forcefully pushed into, and leave the room. I have just enough time to take in my surroundings – no windows, a single bare bulb that barely illuminates the cinder-block walls – before the door bursts open and three different officers appear. It is hard to make out each face of the Chinese men in blue police issued shirts, but I am certain that the officer who attacked me with his club in the back seat of the police car is not among them.

The tiny room is packed, even though there are only four of us inside. The officers stand over me; they take long drags on their cigarettes and blow the smoke directly into my face. They berate me ceaselessly, spitting and screaming at me in Chinese. I comprehend nothing—nothing but the anger that permeates their words, and the spittle that accompanies them.

One officer leaves and comes back with a fourth, and they squeeze into the room. The fourth officer is apparently my translator. “What are you doing here?” he screams. “Why are you going around hurting our people?”

In spite of myself, I’m flushed with relief at hearing my native tongue. The relief will not last long. “I’m just here traveling, sir,” I manage to respond, “and I haven’t hurt anyone, but I was attacked earlier in the evening.”

He is not appeased. “Where are you from?” he screams, louder. “Where is your passport? What are you doing here?”

“I’m from America,” I choke out. “I don’t have my passport with me, all of my things are at my friend’s house, and I’m in China traveling.”

He pounds on the desk to which I’m chained. “You are lying! Where are you from? Where is your passport? Why are you here?”

I don’t know what caused this officer to insinuate I was lying. Did he feel I was in his country illegally or did my dark skin make him believe I wasn’t an American? I didn’t know what to think but somewhere in my mind, I heard my mother’s voice. *Just tell the truth. The truth will set you free*, so I did know what to say. “I am not lying to you, sir. I’m here from America, traveling, and everything I own is at my friend’s house.”

He sneers. “You think America is so strong?” he screams. “You think you can go around hurting our people? *This is China! This is China!*”

I am paralyzed with both confusion and fear. I’ve said nothing of the sort; I just answered his questions. I’d hoped that it might be safer here than in the police car on the way over, but at the time, I couldn’t imagine anything worse than where I was and what was happening. *How did I get here?* Now, I don’t have to imagine, I am living it, and I knew the worst was yet to come. *I must be dreaming, because this is too bizarre to be real*, I thought to myself. But the cuts on my skin and the bruises on my body remind me that I am awake. This is not a dream; it’s a nightmare.



On the hospital bed, moaning in pain, lay a 19-year-old girl—too young to buy beer, barely old enough to vote. In a few short minutes, she would no longer be a girl. She would be a woman.

“We have to perform an emergency C-section right now,” the doctor cried

frantically. “The child’s heartbeat is extremely irregular. If we don’t get him out, he may not make it.”

While the doctor and nurse pushed the bed down the hall to the operating room, the girl clutched her stomach and cried. “Please,” she said – to the doctor, to the nurse, to God, to anyone and to no one – “Please save my baby. Please don’t let my baby die”, the young girl exclaimed while thinking of the months of her pregnancy, eagerly anticipating the day she was to meet her heart in human form.

God smiled upon her, and the operation was a success.

“It’s a boy!” shouted the doctor, but before the girl – now a woman – could see the baby’s face, another doctor whisked him away.

“Is he okay? Is my baby okay?” the woman cried.

“He’s fine,” the doctor said softly, “but we want to keep it that way.”

For several hours, the woman lay in the hospital room, her abdomen cramping as it labored to return to normal, her breasts excruciatingly full of milk with no baby to expel it. But it was not her physical pain that she focused on. Her heart longed to see her child, to feel his heart beat against her fingers, to smell his neck and kiss his smooth, dark cheeks.

Finally, another doctor wheeled in a small rolling bassinet, and she peered inside to see her son’s angelic face. She cried again, this time with relief.

She noticed something odd. “What is that tube on him?” she asked the doctor.

“It’s a catheter,” he replied. “We had to run it through a blood vessel in his thigh, up to his heart, to ensure he is receiving oxygen. It also helps us make sure his heart is strong and healthy.”

The young woman was frightened. The baby was so small, so fragile. “Will he be okay?”

“Yes, but we will have to keep him for a few days for testing and monitoring.”

The woman was young and strong, and she knew she would recover from her surgery soon. Which meant she might be going home without her baby. “For how long? Can I stay, too?”

The doctor touched her hand softly. “You can stay until you are better, but I don’t know how long before your child will be well enough to go home.”

She picked up the baby, laid his tiny body on her chest, and did the only thing she knew to do—she prayed. “Father, watch over this baby. I know you didn’t give him to me just to take him away, God. Please continue to keep him safe.”

Wendell Lee Brown, she would name him. Wendell after his father and grandfather; Lee, the last name of his godmother, her best friend; and Brown, the surname of her and her father. Wendell was born the morning of December 6, 1986. Finally, on December 22, with highest praise to God, Antoinette Brown and Wendell Russell brought their son home. They’d gotten exactly what they wanted for Christmas.

Antoinette was a freshman in college and a cheerleading coach for the Police Athletic League team, the Eastside Colts. Wendell had played for the Colts in his youth and Antoinette had cheered for the team also. Antoinette and Wendell were childhood sweethearts; they were raised in the same neighborhood and shared the same friends and interests. Their entire lives, to that point, were centered in that one area on Detroit’s east side, and that was where they would raise their child. Yes, they knew the risks—a city plagued by high crime rates, redlining, violence, and saturated with liquor stores, drugs,

and myriad other vices. The Eastside of Detroit was considered one of the most dangerous areas in America, but the young parents made a vow to each other and to their child, to keep him away from the dark path that so many others near them had followed. They would teach him to be loving, faithful, and true.

Big Wendell graduated high school, and Antoinette earned her Associate's degree in education. Knowing she needed to provide a good life for her child, Antoinette pursued her passion and attended beauty school, where she graduated as a licensed cosmetologist. It was a career she would thrive in, and which would enable her to support herself and her son.

Soon, with the pressures of maintaining a home, jobs, and a child, Antoinette and Big Wendell's relationship began to unravel. For the first time in their young lives, they felt things would be better if they were not together. The elder Wendell wanted to be a part of something bigger than himself and enlisted in the United States Army, which sent him far away from his little family and from the city of Detroit.

Antoinette later had another child, my brother, Kwame. Now a mother of 2 boys and a full-time cosmetologist with great business savvy, she decided to move out of the basement of her home where she had been previously conducting her business and get into a hair salon. Her business and presence in the hair and nail industry began to sky-rocket. She would use her talents as a hair stylist to provide for her family and worked extremely hard to ensure all of our needs and wants were met.

The love and nourishment came rather easily, but the safety was a bit more challenging. Antoinette understood the dangers of Detroit, having lived there all her life. Heeding the adage *Idle hands are the devil's workshop*, Antoinette enrolled young Wendell in multiple sports and education programs. A busy child has no time for nonsense. Sports were a staple in the single-parent household, for many reasons—socialization, entertainment, health, and of course mischief avoidance—but Antoinette primarily instilled in her son the value of education. She enrolled Wendell in every learning program she could find in the area – with the help of her brother and of both young Wendell's godparents – and pushed him to excel academically. With the loving and assertive hand of his mother, uncle, godfather, and godmother, Wendell – often the youngest in the class – was soon considered advanced for his age, both academically and athletically.

That young boy, of course, was me: Wendell L. Brown grew up in a very tight-knit family in which both sets of grandparents were exceedingly influential. My maternal grandparents demonstrated the importance of love and family—they were married over 50 years and had 6 children to whom they showed love, support, and the importance of sticking together. These values were instrumental in my upbringing, and during frequent family gatherings I gained a deep understanding of how precious those blood ties were. My paternal grandparents lived separately, but my mother made sure I spent time with one of them every weekend. Being with them was special because it made me feel close to my father as well, and it was they who developed my love and trust in God. They were in church every Sunday, prayed and read the Bible daily, and were quick to do good deeds for others. My entire family taught me how to give and receive love. Though we had little money and limited resources, my support system was vast and my mother along with our loved ones guaranteed all of my needs and most of my wants would be met. I wasn't just raised by my mother—I was raised by my entire Detroit family, the community. And they did everything they could to ensure I would grow to be a strong, smart, loving, positive, and

God-fearing man.

My mother Antoinette started teaching me from day one, but I officially started school at 4 years old. At 5, I started participating in organized sports, beginning with basketball. I liked basketball – and still do – but when I started playing football at age 6, I never looked back. I loved everything about it—running, jumping, catching, and tackling; but also the camaraderie and the teamwork. Football demands that every player work together in order to be successful on each play, each drive, each game. Sports kept me active and having fun, but, like my mother hoped, also kept me out of trouble. She knew how much I loved to compete and used sports as motivation for me to do my chores, homework, and keep up with all my other responsibilities. Like Ricky from *Boyz n the Hood*, I never left home without my football in my hands.

I didn't just love to play football; I loved to watch it as well. I watched every game I could and talked about them for days afterwards. I often told my family that I would be one of those famous players—that I would be on TV one day. "You can do and be whatever you want, but only if you believe," my mother told me. "Believe in yourself, and believe in God."

And I did believe. As I sat and watched my heroes – Barry Sanders, Jerry Rice, Reggie White, Ray Lewis, and Deion Sanders – on TV, I daydreamed about the day I would don my football uniform with the NFL shield on it. I could hear the ref's whistle; I could smell the freshly cut grass; I could feel the roar of 100,000 fans from the bleachers shouting my name : *Wendell! Wendell! Wendell!*

Every day, I screamed, "I'm going to the League, Momma!" as I threw the ball around the house, praying I wouldn't get yelled at for hitting the ceiling or wall or knocking something over. Football was my ticket to give my family the life we'd always dreamed of. I was determined that I would play in the NFL and make sure my mother and family never had to struggle. I loved the game of football and from a young age, I knew I would be one of the greatest to ever play. I also knew I would take care of all of us by doing it.

Chapter Two

THE MAN, THE MYTH, THE LEGEND

The easiest thing to get into and the hardest thing to get out of is trouble.

-Uncle Raymond

This is China! The officer continues his repetitive tirade, delivering it directly into my face with hot breath, saliva, cigarette smoke, and piercing eyes. The intent is to instill fear, segregation, and a sense of *otherness*—and it does. I am alone, and I am petrified. I drop my head to my hands to massage a bruise on it, and the dim light reflects off of the silver restraint on my wrist. Once again, I wonder how I got here.

I came to Chongqing, the sister city of my hometown of Detroit, as an invited guest, to play football. I'd felt honored by the request, and excited to see the other side of the world, immersing myself in a culture with new people, food, music, and customs, while doing what I loved. I've been in China for a year, working and traveling the country, and I had started to feel less like a guest and more like an integrated part of the sprawling metropolis on the Yangtze River.

Until the screaming officer in the tiny room reminds me that I am an outsider. His strong words were implying that I had imposed on their country and was a threat to their home, their citizens, and their way of life. Though his English was limited, his message was perfectly clear: I'd been *invited*, but I was never really *welcomed*. "*This is China!*"

Officers come in and out of the tiny interrogation room for what feels like days, all of them screaming, accusatory, and angry. I answer the same questions over and over—who I am, why I came to China, what happened at the bar. But they will not stop. They press and they scream; they interrogate and they spit, offering not even the smallest bit of relief from their beratement. I've explained everything that happened one hundred times over and the more I explain the altercation, the more I can't believe it led me to be chained to a desk inside a Chinese police station.

After many hours, one of the policemen offers an unlit cigarette in my direction, wordlessly. I nod my head yes, despite the fact that I don't smoke cigarettes. I've seen smokers visibly relax after the first drag on a cigarette, leaning back and exhaling slowly; perhaps, I think, the same will happen with me. Besides, the room is already filled with smoke.

Because my hands are still chained to the desk, the cigarette is placed between my lips and lit for me. I inhale deeply, anticipating the rush of nerve-calming nicotine, eager to lean back and feel the small bit of relaxation that is to come. Instead, I choke uncontrollably, dropping the lit cigarette to the concrete floor. The smoke burns and clogs my throat, and I begin to vomit. Every officer present goes ballistic, screaming even louder, as if my body's reaction were a personal affront to them. One officer kicks a wastebasket toward me, and I continue vomiting bile and saliva and the last contents of my stomach. Which isn't much. I've been offered no food, or even water, since they dragged me here.

There are no windows, no sunlight, and I have no idea what time it is or how long

I've been here. What I do know is that my stomach is tied in knots from nervousness and nausea; and that my head is pounding from dehydration, lack of nourishment, and an infinite amount of other things. My attempts to explain my situation have fallen on deaf ears, and I grow more and more concerned about my circumstances. I think of my family – my son, my mother, my friends – and, of course, my own life. I've been treated worse than an animal, but I hold out hope that they have some modicum of integrity—the very least they can do is let me call someone.

I try my hand. “May I have a phone call?” I ask, miming a phone to my ear the best I can with my pinky and thumb, leaning my head down toward my handcuffed wrists. The gesture is unmistakable, and I see recognition of my request in their eyes. I repeat my petition. “Do I have a phone call?” I say, my makeshift finger-phone still at my ear. But no phone is offered to me, no response given. No connection to anyone outside these four hostile walls.

Instead, the officers retrieve my cell phone and search through it. For what, I do not know. They make several calls, both from their phones and from mine, and I feel a burning jealousy. The devices in their hands, so close I could reach out and touch them if my hands were free, taunt me with the possibility of hearing my mother's sweet voice. She is just there, twelve inches and a million miles away, on the other side of the line. She's probably thinking all is well with her son—maybe laughing with friends, or walking around the block in the fresh air, or drinking a tall glass of iced tea. My mouth waters at the thought.

One officer calls someone on my phone and speaks to them, but I cannot understand anything he says. Frustrated, I say, “How long will I be forced to stay here?” I receive no answer, but the question makes me think. How will my absence affect my son? What will my family think of me after this? Will they be ashamed? How will an international arrest record affect my life? I have no answers, but the possibilities serve to worsen my headache even further.

The door opens, and in walks a familiar face—familiar, but not friendly. It is the officer who assaulted me in the back of the squad car on the way here. I burn with rage, remembering his merciless attack on me while I was defenseless. But he's not finished degrading me. He tells me to strip down to my underclothes, and – angry but fearful – I comply. A blue Polo shirt with a salmon-colored horse logo, and salmon-colored Polo pants to match. I would never see those clothes again.

For nearly 30 minutes I'm alone, chained to the desk, wearing nothing but my underwear and an A-shirt. Finally, they bring me a pair of sweatpants. They are too small, but I'm happy to have at least some relief from the humiliation and discomfort in this tiny, freezing room. Yesterday, I carefully picked out my clothes, swapping out one shirt for another because the blue wasn't quite right. Today, I am relishing a colorless pair of sweats that only come halfway down my calf and constrict my abdomen. How things have changed.

An officer enters and unchains me from the desk. Again, my standards are relative. Yesterday, I went to the gym to lift weights and threw a football around with friends. Today, I am grateful just to be able to lift my bound wrists above my head.

Six officers escort me through the police station. *Six* officers for *one* handcuffed man, as if I were some master criminal or escape artist. I am disoriented and bewildered, praying once again for a familiar voice, a familiar face. And then, as if answered by God directly, I

see one. En route to the front of the police station, I pass many small rooms like the one I just left, occupied by interrogating officers and frightened civilians. In one of them, to my great delight, sits my translator, Ling. She has been my travel companion for the past year, a smart and competent woman who quickly became my friend. Earlier today, she was smiling and happy; now, she is anxious and distraught, her chin on her chest and crying frantically. She sees me and stands up, trying to come and hug me. But she doesn't make it. Two of my escorts push her away and bark at her in Chinese, and she returns, crying, to the small room.

My heart swells with compassion for my friend. "Stop crying," I tell her, "everything will be okay. I will see you soon! I promise." The police push me through the front door, and if Ling responded, I couldn't hear. Moments after my escorts throw me into the waiting police van, dread and regret wash over me. *Why didn't I tell her to call my family?* I chastize myself. *Will I really see her again?* But at the time, Ling was much more hysterical and dismayed than I, so all I could think about was comforting her.

I try to focus on the moment. They've told me nothing, so I ask, "Where are you taking me?" Unsurprisingly, I'm ignored. I look out the window onto the once-friendly streets of Chongqing, wishing I could turn back the clock to yesterday and never step into the bar where the incident occurred. The sky is darkening—it's evening, and I realize I've been in police custody for nearly 24 hours, with no food, no water, and no communication with anyone who could help me. Outside, the city of Chongqing bustles with nightlife. Curbside shops and restaurants are full of people walking, shopping, laughing, eating and drinking. The irrational jealousy rises in me again. A man about my age with shopping bags in one hand reaches his other arm around the waist of his companion – a pretty girl with shiny black hair pulled into a tight braid – and kisses the top of her head. I close my eyes and face forward, pushing the image out of my mind.

After a 20-minute ride, the officers pull me out of the van, and I realize they've brought me back to the location where I was attacked. The bar is full of people with drinks in hand, talking and laughing. The music is blaring before we walk in, but then it stops suddenly. Time seems to freeze. Everyone stands still and stares at me as I'm dragged through the bar. I am embarrassed and wish I could hide my face. Just last night, I was here as an honored guest of the owner; tonight, onlookers take pictures of me—in handcuffs, bruised and bloody, unshowered and poorly dressed—while six officers manhandle me and push me through the crowd. *How did I get here?* Standing at the exact spot where I am attacked I relive the moment over and over. In the back of the bar, in the presence of some of the bar staff, the officers force me to explain the incident yet again. I have told it so many times it feels rehearsed. I make it through the interrogation, and the officers lead me back through the bar and throw me back in the van. We now make our way through the city to the expressway.

By now, the roads are pitch black. Where I once saw the colorful lights of the bustling city, I now see only the beam of the van's headlights. Once again, I wonder what is happening, *where are you taking me?* I asked. And once again, my questions are ignored.

We ride for forty minutes, exit the expressway, then the driver turns onto a grassy backroad. I see the dust coming up as we drive and on all sides, there are no people save the officers, no lights save the headlights. The van is surrounded by nothing but darkness and trees and wild animals. My stomach sinks lower as I realize why they've brought me here.

They're about to kill me. They're going to finish what they started on the way to the police station. I'm about to die and no one will ever find me out here. Again, I think about my son, my mother. We ride and ride, continuing to where I'm certain will be my final resting place, among the trees and brush on a deserted road, 7,500 miles from home.

Out of nowhere a wall of bricks appears. We keep driving until we come upon a gate, and then stop. The gate is closed, and the driver blows the horn, over and over, for at least five minutes. Finally, the gates open, and we drive through.

My mind races again. *Where am I? I need to speak to my family right now. I wish I could call Unc. He would know exactly what to say, exactly what to do. I need my uncle!*



Break bread with your people, said the 6'4", 270-pound man beside me, staring intently into my eyes. "Break bread, Nephew! You have to give to the people. If you aren't giving back, you aren't doing anything." Every time I climbed into the passenger seat of Superman's truck, I was greeted with those five words. "Break bread with your people"—meaning give to those in need, those less fortunate than you. Give them what they need to help them grow, to reach their fullest potential. *Be a helpmeet! Give! Break bread with your people!*

It was at a large family gathering when I was about seven that I gave my uncle his nickname. My cousin, also about seven, was playing around, as kids will do, and somehow aroused the anger of one of the grown-ups. The adult responded by grabbing my cousin around her neck and squeezing her throat. And that's when I saw my uncle, Raymond Brown Jr., grab that man by his neck and lift him off his feet. "Don't you ever touch that little girl again!" Raymond yelled, and I stood in awe. I'd never seen anyone lifted off their feet like that, except in movies. *He's Superman*, thought seven-year-old me, and the name stuck.

My uncle was the biggest, strongest, smartest, coolest, and most loving person I had ever known. He was my father figure, my positive male role model, and the person I wanted to emulate my entire life. Besides the woman who gave birth to me, he was the greatest person in the world in my eyes, always teaching me through words and, more importantly, by example. He didn't just say, "Break bread with your people," he lived it.

Unc was always in teaching mode. Every time I saw him, he said, "Men were born to do two things, if nothing else: Lead and love!" At the least, a man would be called to lead his wife and children; at the least, called to love his family members. And he showed me both, every day: he led me, and he led me with love.

Mental toughness was also in the curriculum. "Our strongest muscle rests right between our ears!" he cried. "Whether you believe you *can*, or whether you believe you *can't*, you're right either way." He said this many times, and I remember the day when I really discovered it was true. I was 17 years old, and my uncle and I were working out. I watched in awe as he bench presses 315 pounds, lifting it like it was a feather. *Superman*, I thought once again. I knew there was no way I could do it; it would crush me.

He must have heard my thoughts. "Your turn. Get under it," he said.

I froze. "I can't do that much, Unc. I can't even lift it off the bar."

He took a step toward me and looked intensely into my eyes. "Remember what I said? Whatever you believe will happen, will happen." He pointed to the barbell. "It's not

that much weight. It's light. Believe that. You can do it."

I looked at the stacks of weights mounted on either side of the barbell. *Light as a feather*, I thought, and took a deep breath. And then I lifted 315 pounds for the first time in my life. As he pointed right above his temple with his left index finger, he uttered, "This is our strongest muscle right here". It felt amazing—but seeing my uncle's nod of approval surpassed that feeling sevenfold. Superman was proud of me. I was on top of the world.

I remembered the first time I noticed making my uncle proud. It was after my first season of playing football, when I was six years old. Myself, my mother, uncle, and the rest of my family went to the end-of-season football banquet. I hadn't gotten much playing time that season—in fact, I rode the bench the entire year. I didn't know what to expect, I just knew my teammates and I were dressed very nice. But then, my name was called and my family clapped and cheered loudly for me. While I walked up to the podium to receive my trophy I remembered the beaming smiles my mother and uncle had on their faces. It was as if I had just won MVP. I felt very special, knowing they were proud of me no matter what. I really did win MVP that day, I was *their* MVP, though I was a practice player all season long.

Four years later, I would hear the worst news of my life. Superman had been in a serious car accident, and initially the doctors didn't know if he would survive. My mother and I broke down on hearing the news. Like she had the day I was born, and so many times before and since, she held me close to her and called to a higher power. She prayed for my uncle's life, pleading with God to hear her. Uncle Raymond was everything to us. We couldn't lose him.

The doctors removed a steel pipe that had impaled Unc's hip and leg, mere centimeters from his spinal cord. Raymond's entire family—his wife, siblings, and parents, along with my mother and me—were there at the hospital, waiting for news. After the surgery, the doctor found us in the waiting room and approached us. His solemn expression was hard to read, especially for a 10-year-old.

"Raymond survived the surgery," he said, and my mother sobbed with relief. But there was more. "The damage was significant," he said, and went on to tell us that my uncle was paralyzed, that he would require the use of a wheelchair for the rest of his days on earth, never to walk again.

I was stunned by the news. The world stood still for a moment, but my mind raced. I just couldn't picture my uncle not standing strong and upright. I then remembered the words Unc had said to me so many times: *Your mind is your strongest muscle. Whether you think you can, or whether you think you can't, you're right either way.* As much as I appreciated the doctors' help, I realized they just didn't know the heart, will, strength, and favor of the man I called Superman. It didn't matter what *they* believed, only what my uncle believed, what I believed. And I believed with all my heart that he would walk again.

One day, a few months later, a doctor entered my uncle's hospital room to check up on him. But he found the bed empty. Looking around frantically, he found my uncle in the bathroom, standing, using only the wheeled IV stand for support. The doctor called in the nurses to see, and everyone was astonished—they couldn't believe what they were seeing. But it was no surprise to me. He was Superman, after all. To my family and me, Uncle Raymond was already the strongest man in the world, but now the doctors and nurses at DMC Detroit Receiving Hospital believed it as well.

During those months, Uncle Raymond was a living testament to the power of the mind. I'd pictured him with one finger pointed to his head. Our *strongest muscle rests right between our ears*, he'd said many times, and he proved it. Instead of lying in bed wallowing about his injuries, he conquered every obstacle set to hinder him, exercising his body every day, believing despite the doctors' diagnosis that he would one day walk on his own power. It wasn't the doctors who dictated his status; it was Raymond's belief in himself and in God.

Raymond was always pushing—not just others, but himself as well. *1MOTOGO*, read his license plate, meaning just one more semester to go in order to earn the 'full house'—his Ph.D. in psychology. He pushed his body in the gym; he pushed his mind in school. And he expected me to do the same. He often stressed to me that one day football would be taken from me; but if I earned my degree, it was mine to keep forever. And he lived it—not only excelling as an athlete but also as a student. He was a man of integrity, and of superior intelligence and business acumen. He was everything to me, and I would emulate the way he dressed, spoke, led, everything. I wanted to be just like him.

I was often asked by my uncle "what is the easiest thing to get into and the hardest thing to get out of? TROUBLE! It's TROUBLE!" Unc always advised that I am to watch my surroundings, watch the people who I hang around, and understand that in the blink of eye things can change. I can be hanging around the wrong people and have done nothing wrong but my name being associated with the names of troublemakers could have me in the midst of mischief. Be a good decision maker and that not only goes for the things I do and say but the company I keep.

He emphasized the need for diligence in other things, too. "What's the hardest thing to get into and the easiest thing to get out of?" he said one day, mixing up his often-used "Trouble!" speech. I thought for a moment, but I couldn't find the answer. He smacked his solid bull chest and shouted, "Shape!" Raymond had been a collegiate athlete, and he impressed upon me the need to keep my heart, my mind, and my muscles in shape. "*Stay* ready and you'll never have to *get* ready," he said. And he lived that, too. We trained together, and ate healthy foods, so that when opportunities came calling, I would be prepared. Years later, when I began playing professional football, the calls would come in randomly, so I was always thankful for that advice. I didn't have to spend weeks or months getting in shape because I always stayed in shape. And, I noticed that advice worked for business and personal relationships as well. When the phone rang, I didn't have to *get* ready, because I *stayed* ready.

Staying ready went beyond maintaining my physical health, though. There are always times in life when you will face some type of difficulties. What will you do when those times arise? Do you tough it out or give up? When things got hard, Superman used another of his famous sayings. "What you gon' do? You gon' box, or you gon' boogaloo?" Meaning, will you persist and fight your way out, or will you dance around the problem? He never failed to follow up that question by adding, "And we don't know how to dance!" Regardless of what hardships and adversities I faced, I knew I couldn't go around, or under, or even over the problem. I had to go *through* it.

When I was young, Gatorade launched the advertising campaign "Be Like Mike." Michael Jordan, the "greatest basketball player of all time," according to the NBA, was and is a global cultural icon, popularizing the game of basketball exponentially around the United States and the world. And Gatorade capitalized on MJ's image and reputation—handsome,

determined, intelligent, successful, and unbeatable. They hit on something big—everyone did, in fact, “wanna be, wanna be like Mike.” They wanted to jump like him, shoot like him, chew their gum like him, stick out their tongues like him. They wanted every pair of Air Jordans they could get their hands on.

Jordan’s presence was inescapable, but although I respected the man for his athleticism and integrity, I didn’t want to “be like Mike.” I wanted to be like another man. Like Bruce Leroy in the movie *The Last Dragon*, this man seemed ensconced in a golden aura that followed him everywhere he went. I wanted to talk like him, act like him, be strong yet gentle, loving and caring yet stern. I wanted to be giving and faithful just like him. I wanted to respect others like he did, and earn their respect in return, just like him. Everyone else wanted to be like Mike, but I wanted to be my uncle, my hero, my Superman: Raymond Brown, Jr.

Chapter Three

RUNNING FOR MY LIFE

*Be strong and of good courage, do not fear nor be afraid of them;
for the Lord your God, He is the One who goes with you.
He will not leave you nor forsake you.*
-Deuteronomy 31:6

The ride has gotten quiet, but my mind is racing and my thoughts are loud, as if a trumpet were being blown directly into my ear while I sit in the van between the officers. We are parked in front of a wall of bricks that seems to be as high as the moon. I can't see where the wall ends, nor can I see beyond the enormous steel door that we've stopped in front of. The door slowly begins to open from the middle, the driver shifts from *Park* into *Drive*, and the van moves forward.

We drive down a trail in the dark. A few moments later, the headlights shine on a huge building. Standing in front of it are nearly 20 uniformed officers, along with 4 people in white lab coats, who I assume are doctors. The officers pull me out of the van and hand my plastic bagged personal belongings to one of the Chinese officials standing in front of us. I search for a friendly face but see none. Still, I am alone.

The prison officials take me to an open area, uncuff me, and I hear two words in English, "*clothes off*". I begin to strip off all my clothes starting with the A shirt I'd put on the morning before followed by the undersized sweatpants, and my underwear. An older officer standing with a water hose in hand begins to spray me in the face and all over my body. The water hits me like hundreds of stabbing knives, while the men in white lab coats watch, expressionless. Naked and dripping, I watch them come forward and give me a cup. I have an idea of what the cup is for but after one of the officers says '*urine*', I know without doubt. Before I can move, one white-coated person ties a piece of rubber around my arm and sticks a needle in me to retrieve a blood sample. When he finishes, I manage to fill the cup and hand it over. Then they allow me to redress and the handcuffs are reapplied to my wrist in front of me. Officers then gave me a blanket, a bowl, a spoon, a finger toothbrush, a travel-size toothpaste, and an oversized blue jersey with the number 325 printed in yellow on the front and back. The elder officer gestures for me to put the blue jersey on.

Two officers lead me through the building as I walk with my palms up, and the blanket resting on my forearms with the bowl, spoon, toothbrush and toothpaste on top. It is dark, with random light bulbs spaced sporadically around, flickering, providing the only source of light. I hear the bars of a prison cell opening – the 'front door' of my new home, I assume – and we walk past several other cells until we approach the newly opened cell. They push me inside and follow me in.

The cell isn't much bigger than the last room I was in, but at least I will have a cell to myself. Or so I think. I hear voices in conversation but before I can figure out where they are coming from, the Chinese conversations go quiet and I hear more bars moving. I see some bars just ahead move to the side. These are the bars of yet another cell; an inner cell. The first thing I notice – the first thing anyone could notice – is the smell. It is so foul that I

nearly vomit. Even the night air coming through the bars above the outer cell cannot mask that awful stench.

There are bodies everywhere! More than 30 Chinese men are crammed inside the place, so close to one another that their bodies are overlapping. One of my escorts barks some commands in Chinese and points to where I am to lie. With everyone else already lying all over the floor, someone is forced to move to make room for me. Clutching the blanket with both hands as if it were my only friend, I hold out my wrists towards one of the officers, and he uncuffs me. I start to walk to my assigned spot at the rear of the cell but am unable to see the floor beneath me, so I walk carefully through, stepping over the Chinese men lying on the ground and trying not to step on anyone. Within the first 60 seconds of being in jail, I make my first enemy—the Chinese inmate whose place I have taken glares at me with resentment and hate.

As the officers depart, the bars on both the inner and outer cells move from left to right, along with the thick steel door, enclosing me into my home. I am now trapped and for how long, I have no idea. I caution a look around, but the more I see the worse it seems. The room is implausibly filthy—walls that I assume were once white are now covered in dirt, cobwebs, and only God knows what else. I can't see the floor for all the prisoners, but I imagine it is as bad or worse. I am now imprisoned in China, and if my safety was never endangered before, it definitely is now. Everyone is staring, talking, and pointing at me. But being in the rear of the cell is perfect, because I can watch what is happening in front of me without worrying about anyone sneaking up behind me.

I keep asking myself the same question: *How did I get here?* It is at that instant that I begin to understand the severity of my situation, and I prepare myself mentally for whatever may take place tonight. Physically, I prepare myself for everything—everything except sleep. How can I possibly sleep? I have to watch everything that is going on in this room full of criminals. Will someone try to kill me tonight? I'm sure they're many weapons throughout the cell and my eyes would be peeled all night so I didn't miss a thing that happened around me. If I would be killed tonight, I would look my killers in their eyes, it wouldn't happen while I slept. Even if I wanted to sleep, the non-stop yelling from those in my cell and those beyond would forbid it—over the din of the inmates surrounding me, who speak only in Chinese, I can clearly hear the words that the only English-speaking officer from the night before kept repeating over and over, like a mantra, an anthem, a warcry: *"This Is China! This Is China! This is China!"*



Martin Luther King Jr. High was one of the city of Detroit's best high schools, both academically and athletically. Some of Detroit's most influential people received their education at King, and many of its graduates went on to lead prosperous lives. I had heard the stories from my family—I knew of the prestige and the reputation of the school, the great instructors, coaches, security guards, and students. Even before I started middle school I was excited about one day becoming a King Crusader.

On my first day at the school, a huge officer stopped and grabbed 13-year-old me as I walked through the legendary Detroit Martin Luther King halls. "You're Antoinette Brown's son, aren't you?"

"Yes," I replied.

“I know because you look just like Raymond.”

It wasn’t the first time – or the last – that I would hear that statement, but every time I heard it, I was proud.

“It’s good you’re finally here,” Officer Smith said. “I’ve known your family forever. You have some huge shoes to fill.” He knew my family very well, I learned—he had been a police officer and head of school security when my mother, uncle, and aunts had attended the school decades earlier.

My young mind thought about Officer Smith’s “huge shoes to fill” comment. Both my mother and uncle had been superior athletes at King High. And, I had always told my uncle that I was the better athlete of us two, but as I got older, I began to better understand the things that *Superman* had been teaching me. Officer Smith was speaking about my uncle the community servant, the leader who possessed a spirit of love. He was more than man—he was a legend. Huge shoes to fill indeed.

The heart issues that I’d had as a baby, which had worried my mother so, largely cleared up on their own. I continued to get regular check-ups but the doctors reported nothing unusual, and I was cleared for playing high school football. I was ready to pursue my dream. I was going to the League, and nothing was going to stop me.

On top of practicing with the high school football team all summer, I’d also attended a summer school program for incoming freshmen. I had always been one of the best players when I stepped on the field, but now I was a 13-year-old kid, practicing with 17- and 18-year-old young men with college scholarship offers from some of the nation’s best schools. They had a great advantage over me. They were bigger, stronger, faster, and had a greater knowledge of the game; but I was determined to be great regardless. Fully committed, I worked hard during individual drills though I was not allowed much playing time when we did team drills. Mentally I was ready to be the best player on the team and I didn’t allow anything to get my spirits down.

I did, however, consider going back to youth ball, where I could get more playing time, but my uncle didn’t approve. “You’re playing where you’re supposed to play,” he said. “You’ve already proven yourself in youth ball, and your talent and hard work will soon be noticed.” I earned a nickname that summer that has followed me into adulthood—*Greg Lloyd*, or *G. Lloyd* for short, after the great Pittsburgh Steelers linebacker. In fact, some people in school didn’t know my real name was Wendell Brown until an article about me appeared in the newspaper.

The adjustment to high school academics was a bit rough. In middle school, I was an A-B student, but in my first semester at King High I failed my first-hour English class. I’d never failed a class before and my mother was extremely disappointed. Shortly after report cards came out, I was talking to some friends in the hallway when someone told me my uncle was in the building. I felt my heart in my throat. I knew exactly why he had come.

I ran, trying to get out of the building before he found me. But he saw me in the hallway, grabbed me by my shirt collar, pinned me up against a locker, and gave me an interrogation worthy of the Spanish Inquisition.

“What are you doing in here?” he asked.

“Nothing,” I responded.

Clutching my collar tighter, he screamed, “You’re exactly right! Nothing! Why the f*#k are you failing classes?”

My mind was wondering, *what is he doing walking through the school without security or a teacher, im sure its not permitted and why doesn't anybody care that he is beating me up right now*, but I couldn't say that and I had to think of something—so I blurted out, “My momma isn't getting me to school on time, and once the bell rings, the teacher won't let anyone inside. That's why I didn't pass my first English class.”

The lame excuse made him even angrier. “How can *you* failing a class be blamed on someone else? How can you blame that on your mother?”

I knew he was right. From that day on, Unc made me get up two hours earlier to catch the city bus to school—I hated it, and I hated that I couldn't ask my mother for a ride even more. My uncle said if he had to come back to the school again, it wouldn't be nice for me. I knew exactly what that meant. I was never late to my first-hour English class again.

After freshman year things got a bit easier. My grades improved a lot, and since my family stressed the importance of being athletically, academically, and socially sound in order to be successful, I focused more intently on those things. Not only did I make sure I was on top of my grades, but my family did also.

My uncle insisted I stay with him a few months each year, and he would wake me at 6:00 each morning to work out before he dropped me off at school. I acclimated to high school and became one of the top football players in the state of Michigan, earning a 3.5 grade point average—along with tons of recruitment mail from universities and colleges all around the nation. I was excited about the experience I was having, and I envisioned an even better one for the future. I tried to stay focused on my long-term goal, which was to make it to the NFL and take care of my mother, but people often came around to try and distract me.

One small example of this was a friend who worked at a shoe store. The job came with a few perks, and he said he could get me a job there. I was excited because I would be the ‘shoe plug’, and I could get a discount on all the latest styles. I was ready to have all the new Jordans—and to be making my own money.

I asked my mother if I could get the job. “No,” she said plainly. “You have to run track.”

I begged and pleaded, citing all my reasons, but she held firm. Finally, she gave a small concession. “If you continue to excel academically and athletically, I will get you the shoes you want. But you must run track because we have to get you a football scholarship, so you must improve your speed! We can afford the shoes, but we can't afford to pay for college. You're running track.”

I had to maintain a B+ average, she said, and train hard, both in track and in football. I knew she was right. I studied hard and practiced harder, lifting weights and getting faster every day.

I had other friends who were working also—but their money did not come in check form. The young men who drove nice cars and carried pockets full of cash did so by selling drugs. They tried to recruit me into the ‘business’, but of course I didn't ask my mother about *that* opportunity. I knew what her answer would be.

My family instilled in me the wisdom of staying away from bad influences, and I was careful about who I hung around with and who I called a friend. In some ways, running track was like running away from trouble—running away from those who didn't have the same goals I did, running away from violence in my community, even running away from

death. Many people my age and even younger died every day in Detroit; some of those young lives were even my friends.

In my junior year, some friends and I were hanging out, waiting for one of our teammates to get off work and come meet up with us. But that meeting never came. Tragically, he was gunned down on his way to meet us. We were all devastated. Receiving that call from his family changed my life. It truly hit home and made me look at things differently—my surroundings, my friends and acquaintances, the decisions I made on a daily basis. My friend had done nothing wrong – he was a lot like me in many ways, a good football player and a good student with a supportive family – yet his life was stolen all the same. Death was never far away from you in Detroit.

I knew I had to make it to a safer environment than the one I was in. I thought about not only what I was running *from*, but also what I was running *to*—I was running to safety, running to a better future, running to reach my full potential. Running for my life. The grim irony was that the police said that my friend, too, had been running for his life as he was killed.

As one of Michigan's standout players, I was invited to many summer football camps around the nation, but my family could only afford to send me to the biggest one close to home—The University of Michigan football camp. Coaches from many colleges and universities came to the camp to recruit players from the state of Michigan, and the camp was so popular that even high school players from surrounding states would attend.

I was one of the big-name players from the city of Detroit, and by attending the Michigan camp, I drew a lot of interest from different universities. It bolstered my recruiting, which led to multiple full athletic scholarship offers. My mother and uncle, of course, were ecstatic.

I attended the camp both my junior and senior year. In my senior year I received a trophy for being one of the top 5 performers at my position for the entire week. I finished high school as the captain of a winning football team—3 city championships in 4 years. By the end of my high school career, I'd earned 2 first team All-City selections, 2 first team All-Metro selection, 1 second team and 1 first team All-State selection, a Detroit Defensive Player of the Year Award, and team MVP and captain. Being a 2-sport athlete at my mother's request, I also earned a 1st team All-City selection in track and field. Academically I finished high school with a 3.5 overall GPA and posted a 21 on the ACT; both scores were high enough to qualify me academically for a college scholarship.

I had exceeded everyone's expectations—everyone, that is, except my family's and mine. To us, I was doing what I was supposed to do, what they'd raised me to do. I was doing what I knew I could, and what I'd worked hard for. I had gifts, and I worked hard to maximize them, not just athletically but also academically. The multiple full scholarship opportunities were a blessing, and I was grateful, but they weren't just handed to me. They were the fruits of my labor; I had earned them. But now, I had a decision to make, the biggest decision of my life up to that point—which of the generous offers I would accept. It was time to take the next step to achieving the goal I had set in my youth. I would soon be departing for college.

Chapter Four

BEGINNING OF THE END

I learned that courage was not the absence of fear, but the triumph over it. The brave man is not he who does not feel afraid, but he who conquers that fear.

-Nelson Mandela

I run full speed down a prison hallway. From behind me, angry screams fill the passageway, reverberating off the walls, the cell bars, the ceiling and floor. Still running, I take a look behind me, to put a face to my pursuers, but the faces are just a blur of Chinese police officers and prison inmates. My heart pounds, so loudly I can almost hear it over the cacophony of furious screaming and the pounding of boots and bare feet. They are close, there are too many of them for me to take, and somewhere up ahead, there is no way out. Still, I can't stop. A horrible fate looms ahead; of that I am certain. But self-preservation triumphs over reason, so despite the inevitability of my imminent doom, I run.

My legs grow tired, but I run. I pass 20 cells, 30, 50, and I know there must be a wall ahead somewhere, a wall I can't run past. But the screaming behind me pushes me forward, and still, I run. My pursuers get closer, louder, angrier, and bigger; and despite my years of athletics I feel extremely sluggish. My legs are heavy, and the antagonists are right behind, almost in arm's reach. The hallway seems never ending, and so does the pursuit. My feet pound the concrete floor to the rhythm of the undulating clamor behind me, begging for relief but not daring to stop. I am aware of nothing more than the soul inside me that wants to live. So despite my terror and fatigue, I run, and run, and run.

Suddenly, from some unknown place comes the blaring sound of Chinese music. It snaps me up through layers of consciousness until I lie awake, panting, my heart pounding to the fast beat of the unfamiliar music. I've escaped one nightmare only to awaken in another. I am still in prison, a Chinese prison. And there is nowhere to run. *I can't believe I dozed off.* "What are you doing bro", I said to myself in disbelief because I tried to stay awake through the night. "You don't know what could have happened during those few minutes of shut eye". But I wondered, could that dream have been a sign? What might happen today, I wonder? I close my eyes and say a prayer, and then I stand to my feet.



I accepted a full athletic scholarship to Ball State University in Muncie, Indiana. I was now a Division I college student-athlete, a huge accomplishment for me and for my family, and the scholarship lifted a great weight off their shoulders. For me, the excitement of leaving home and spreading my wings into adulthood filled me with buoyant anticipation—a new state, new friends, new scenery and new opportunities. But young as I was, I never lost sight of my ultimate goals: a college degree, and a roster spot on an NFL team.

Before I left Detroit for college, I did something special for my

mother. I wanted to let her know how much I loved, respected, and cherished her and our relationship. She was more than my mother, she was my best friend. I decided to get a tattoo honoring her but being a minor I told her I needed her signature on a release form. After she signed the necessary paperwork, I went to multiple Chinese food restaurants and asked each to write the same 3 words. I asked each worker to read and tell me the meaning of what was written by the last. When I arrived at the tattoo parlor I knew exactly what I wanted and where. A human heart, with my mother's signature going through it, right across the left side of my chest and the words *My First Love* written in Chinese. She was indeed my first love and she was now written both in and on my heart forever.

I was so ecstatic about my new life that I traveled to Indiana the week after high school graduation, to take part in the football team's voluntary summer workout program. This would allow me to get an early jump on learning the playbook; begin to develop a relationship with my coaches and my team of new brothers; and enhance my strength, speed, and conditioning. The decision benefited me greatly—my coaches were able to evaluate me closely before the start of fall camp, and they liked what they saw. They appreciated my work ethic, athleticism, and knowledge of defensive schemes. My enthusiasm gained me an upper hand on not only the other incoming freshmen but also some of the upperclassmen, who'd opted instead to spend their summers at home with their family and friends. I missed my family of course, but among us there was an understanding of priorities. Wendell grinds, he hustles, he pushes his way past everything and everyone, until he gets to the top.

Upon my official visit to the school, they told me I would be playing – and maybe even starting – as a true freshman, instead 'redshirting' me, a common preparatory year whereby college athletes practice and attend classes but don't compete in games. The 17-year-old kid from Detroit was quietly moving up the depth chart before he even put on his new helmet. During that time I stayed in an extra room in the apartment of one of my new teammates. It was a great introduction to college life, an opportunity to have fun every day with my new brothers. Choosing a college had been a hard decision, one my family and I had agonized over. But very soon after I arrived, I knew I had chosen the right school to further my education and to continue my growth as a young man.

After a wonderful month in Indiana, I went back home to play in the Michigan High School All-Star Game, an annual event in which the best players in the state of Michigan were selected and invited for seven days of various activities. The week began with practice at Michigan State University, along with festivities like elementary and middle-school visits where the players read to and played with the youth. The week wound up with a banquet and award ceremony, followed by the game in the 'Big House' at the University of Michigan. The game was called the Pro Bowl by student athletes, the highlight and dream of every Michigan high school football player. My entire family, my high school teammates and coaches, and several of my friends came to support me at many of the events that week, and of course at the big game. It was an honor to compete against the state's top talent, and I enjoyed every second of that week.

Back in Indiana, fall camp had started and the day came for us to take the field wearing our shoulder pads and helmets. But as all the other players suited up, I had to sit and watch, one extra day, until some paperwork came in from home. My teammates noticed, of course, and asked me what was wrong. It was then that they found out I was only

17 years old—and the only minor on the team. The only player who couldn't sign his own college scholarship, insurance contracts, or a contract of any kind without the signature of my parents. For a moment, I felt a bit awkward, a bit singled out. But then I was reminded just how great a decision my family and I had made, sending me to Ball State. My teammates rallied around me, extending themselves to help me adjust to being away from home for the first time, treating me like a 'little brother'. My coaches did the same, but it was still very hard being away from home. I was accustomed to seeing my mother, my brother, and my uncle every single day, and now they were hundreds of miles away. But I had to shrug it off and keep my eyes on the goal. They'd put 17 years into me, and I was determined to give it back.

College life was different in many ways. My schedule was packed—a 6a.m. workout, followed immediately by breakfast and morning classes. A quick lunch and then more classes, then film study, football meetings, followed by football practice. Right after practice was dinner with the team, and then I went straight to the mandatory study table where I studied and did homework until 10:00. After that, I fell into bed, exhausted, then woke at 6a.m. and did the whole thing over again.

I didn't realize the toll that all the stress had taken on me until one day when I woke in the morning, sluggish and exhausted, and rolled over for 'five more minutes' of sleep. Five minutes became several hours, and I slept straight through workouts, classes, and film. Many students come to college to party, and they stay up late and skip class without much of a thought. But my colleagues knew I was not one to slack off and miss class. And so came someone bursting into my dorm room. It was one of the graduate assistants who helped my position coach, and he shook me awake, worried, saying he'd been knocking for nearly 20 minutes. He looked at me and didn't like what he saw. He immediately took me to the football stadium, where team trainers carefully evaluated me.

I was astounded by their diagnosis—anxiety, they said and I'd had an anxiety attack due to homesickness. I hadn't taken into account how much being separated from my family had been affecting me. I'd heard of 'homesickness', but I thought it was just a figure of speech. I didn't realize it could be an actual *sickness*. Upon reflection, though, I understood. Everything had taken a toll on me, mentally, physically, and emotionally. I was missing home, and in a word, tired. College was far more difficult than high school, and I felt that if I didn't earn at least a 3.0 GPA, I was underachieving. My teammates and coaches, and of course my family back in Detroit, came through for me, and they helped me recover and get healthy emotionally. I was exceedingly lucky to have all of them.

I kept pushing on, studying hard and practicing hard. And then, a bit of payoff. On the first kickoff of my first collegiate game, against Boston College, after running down the field, I made the tackle on the first play of my very first collegiate game. Over the screams of thousands of fans, the announcer called my name out over the speaker—*"Freshman Wendell Brown with the tackle for the Cardinals!"* I could feel the vibrations of the announcer's voice and the screams of the fans coursing through my body. At that moment I knew I would have a great career at Ball State. *This* was why I was here; *this* was what I was born to do.

During the first 4 weeks of the season I was in the defensive rotation, but I also started multiple special teams units and did well. And then, week 5, I was plugged into the starting lineup. I hadn't even reached my 18th birthday, and I was a starter on a division 1

college football team. I was set to make a huge impact on the team, and I did, finishing 4th on the team in tackles. The strength and conditioning coach told me several times, “I’m going to turn you into the best linebacker in the nation.” My family and I had believed for years that I would be the nation’s best, but hearing the same sentiment from someone who had no personal investment in me was incredibly gratifying.

The Cardinals finished with a losing record of 2-9, but I’d earned the respect of both my coaches and teammates. I would use my first year as a successful collegiate student-athlete – academically and athletically – as momentum and motivation going into my sophomore year. My goal was to earn the recognition of Academic All-American. We had a good team. We were about to start winning games, and I was going to be the best linebacker in the nation. I could see it; I could feel it; I knew it.

Coming from a high school with a tradition of winning, I had a hard time adjusting to Ball State’s football program, which was in the beginning of its building stages. I had lost more games in one season than I had in all my years as a King Crusader, and it was disheartening. But I could hear my uncle’s voice in my head—“*You gon’ box or you gon’ boogaloo?*” And, remembering I couldn’t dance, I pulled on my metaphorical boxing gloves and stepped into the ring.

Instead of returning home to Detroit for the summer, I stayed in Muncie, taking summer school classes and training for football season as a sophomore. I was set to be an important part of the rebuilding process, in preparation for a sensational championship season. I knew we had a great shot at a winning season. Defensively, we changed from a 4-3 to a 3-4. The coaches made me a stand-up defensive end, moving me from inside linebacker to outside linebacker. I wasn’t crazy about it, but I knew I was the best option for the position, which would make our defense stronger, so I was all for it. I was determined to be a game changer, no matter where I started on the snap of the ball, so I put on 20 pounds of muscle and began working on my pass rush moves.

Game 1 of my sophomore season was a big one. It was an away game against the Iowa Hawkeyes, the #11 team in the nation. We were psyched, ready to prove ourselves as true players and a great football program. When we walked into the visitors’ locker room, however, we were taken aback. The entire room was painted pink. The rumor was that Iowa’s football program did it to play mind games with the opposing team, but we were locked in and ready to shock the world, not allowing anything – especially wall paint – to throw our focus. We suited up, said a prayer, and hit the field.

The game started fast—but not in our favor. By halftime we were down 49-0. We burst into the locker room, and I looked around at my team’s faces—angry, sad, and dejected. Again, I remembered my uncle’s words: “*Men were born to do two things, if nothing else: Lead and love!*” I knew it was my duty to step up. Typically, freshmen and sophomores aren’t allowed to do any speaking; the thinking is that they have yet to give and sacrifice enough to the program compared with upperclassmen. But I had earned the trust and respect of everyone there, and I knew what my uncle would want me to do. Filled with an array of emotions – anger, melancholy, and so much more – I gave a dynamic speech so powerful and meaningful that even the coaches stood to listen.

“Think about all the hard work we’ve put in at practice,” I said. “We are a good team! Too good to be down 50 points at half!” The words poured directly from my heart, tears streaking down my face. I’d played my heart out, and we were getting our asses handed to

us. I was in complete disbelief. “We can be better. We *will* be better. We just need to play to our fullest capabilities,” I finished.

As much as I’d like to say we scored 50 points in the second half, the truth is we didn’t score a single one. But our defense performed significantly better. In the first half, we’d allowed 7 unreturned touchdowns; in the second half, only one. At least we’d stopped the massacre, and I felt like my locker-room speech was instrumental in that little victory. I took a huge step in that first game. It showed my growth not only as an athlete but also as a leader of a college football team, at the young age of 18.

The championship sophomore year I’d anticipated was not to be. We finished the year 4-7, but considering we’d started the year 0-4, I felt like we were on the right track. Despite having my position changed to defensive end, I finished 6th on the team in tackles; and, even more encouraging, I won Ball State’s Elite 11 Award for outstanding special teams play. Academically, I performed well too, putting forth great effort to achieve a 3.0 GPA. I fell short of earning the prestigious Academic All-American award I’d striven for, but I did make the Dean’s List, and my family was proud. Remembering my uncle’s advice about earning my degree, since it could never be taken from me regardless of what happened with football, I added an extra course to my schedule for spring semester so I could earn my degree in 4 years, and not have to return after my NFL career to finish the last semester. And I was certain that I *was* going to the NFL.

Junior year is known as the year to put the world on notice and shine bright in the world of athletics. I hadn’t been chosen as a team captain but I was the vocal leader and the heart and soul of our defense. I was back to playing middle linebacker after the coaches changed our base defense back to 4-3. I was glad to be back in the position where I felt most comfortable and ready to be the team’s impact player on defense. We started the season strong and won our first game—for the first time in my collegiate career, I was on a team with a winning record, 1-0. I hoped we would carry that momentum for the rest of the season; unfortunately we lost the next 3 games, but by a total of only 16 points. It was promising—we’d come a long way since the 56-0 loss to Iowa.

Towards the end of the football season, we traveled to Ann Arbor to play the University of Michigan. I was ecstatic about being back in the Big House for my second showing; it really felt like a ‘home game’ to me. I’d be playing in front of my family and my friends, and would be playing against some friends that I’d played with in high school. For the team, the game was big—for me, it was colossal. I was performing in front of my hometown friends and family after two years away, but even more than that, I knew NFL scouts would be there to evaluate many players on the field that day. Besides, I had something to prove to the college that hadn’t offered me a scholarship. I left nearly 20 tickets at Will Call for my family and friends who made the 30-minute drive from Detroit to see the 40-point underdog Ball State Cardinals take on the #2 nationally ranked and undefeated Michigan Wolverines. To add to the drama, our head coach had previously coached at Michigan, helping lead them to a National Championship. It would be his first time facing his former team since the historic win.

It was the most exciting game I’d ever been a part of. I’d never seen so many people at a sporting event in my life—113,000 fans screaming, cheering, jumping, stomping, and doing the wave. For almost my entire childhood, I’d dreamt of hearing and seeing 6-figure fans while wearing the NFL shield on my jersey, but here I was experiencing it as a young

college athlete barely into adulthood. It was amazing to witness. The fans were having so much fun, and I wanted to have fun too. There were only two ways to do that: first, to impose my will on every man in an opposite-color jersey; and second, to win.

At the end of the 1st quarter, the unranked Cardinals led the #2-ranked Michigan Wolverines 9-7. We were winning by a safety, but we needed a bigger safety net. The game was a nail biter all the way through, the fans wild with screams and stomping so hard the building shook under our feet.

In the 4th quarter, the score was 26-34—the Ball State Cardinals were down by 8 points, but we had possession of the ball. We drove all the way to the 2-yard line, but an incomplete pass thwarted our attempts at a man in the end zone, with just over 2 minutes left. After an unsuccessful drive by Michigan, we got the ball back at midfield—but with only 10 seconds left in the game. At that point, strength and speed took a backseat. We had to rely on prayer but our Hail Mary attempts at the end zone were unsuccessful. It was a nail biter and we fought to the very end. But, it pained me that we let the country's #2 team off the hook and they remained undefeated for another week.

It was disappointing, but we were not disheartened. Ball State was the underdog; no one expected us to compete against the University of Michigan, but we held our own. It was a loss, but not a slaughter. I had 9 tackles and a few big hits, one of which was so hard it elicited a peal of excited roars from the crowd. Our relative success in that game propelled us to wins in the next 2 games, and we finished the season with 5 wins and 7 losses, a big improvement from my freshman year's record of 2-9. My personal performance was even better, as I finished the season 2nd in tackles, 1st in turnovers, and with a MAC Conference Defensive Player of the Week Award under my belt. It was my best collegiate season yet—but I was far from done.

Football and academics occupied most of my life during that period, but I would soon receive a personal blessing as well. On the morning of January 18, 2007, the phone rang at 1:00 a.m. Groggily, I answered. Although I recognized the voice of the woman on the other end, the words came so frantically that I barely understood any of them. After a few minutes, someone else took the phone and told me the news: Wendell Lee Brown Jr. would soon be entering the world. I stayed on the phone for as long as I could, listening to the cries of the woman in pain in the background before I expressed my well wishes for her and for my son. I then went back to sleep to prepare for my 6a.m. workout, but not before sending a prayer up to God to look after my son and his mother and keep them safe, healthy, and strong.

I was a 20-year-old college junior, and I was about to be a father. Everything changed in an instant. Now I had a son to take care of, and I intended to do so as well as my uncle and mother had taken care of me. I'd thought my drive and intensity were as high as they could get, but knowing I had a son to support drove them to a place I didn't even know existed. I had a year and a half left of school. Senior year had to be the best season of my life—I set a personal goal to finish each game with 10 tackles and a turnover, to put the NFL scouts on further notice. I also had to work hard in school so I could earn my degree when I left for the NFL. I still had no doubt I would make it. I never had.

I thought about the life I wanted to provide for my son and the rest of my family. I would soon be living the dream, literally—a dream job, and my young king right with me, to raise and to love. Everything was coming together. I was on track to graduate on time

and kept good grades. I was getting bigger, faster, stronger, and becoming a true student of the game. I went home to Detroit as often as I could to see my new son, and though I wanted to spend that summer with him I had to keep my eye on the goal. I had to take a class and train that summer if I wanted to stay on track. My senior year would be my final and best. I was on top of the world.

And then, disaster. During a team workout in the summer, while bench pressing 365 pounds, a weight I'd lifted hundreds of times, suddenly I felt an extreme and sudden pain. After getting up and being examined by the physical training staff, I was told I had torn my right pectoral muscle. My injury would cause me to miss the entire football season for the first time in my life. It was a crushing blow. I'd been ready to lead the Cardinals as a captain and one of the best players on the team. My mother and uncle had even been getting calls from agents wanting to represent me the next year to the NFL. For 14 years, since I was six years old, all I'd wanted to do was wear that NFL shield. Now when I was so close, this happened. What did my future hold now? Will I recover? Would I play as well when I did? Would I have another chance?

I was distraught for days. I talked with my mother and my uncle, and they comforted and encouraged me as best they could. But I was devastated. The day came for my surgery, and as I lay in bed waiting for them to wheel me in, I looked around the room. On the wall hung a painting of doctors performing a surgery with Christ directing them. I remembered my mother's words, so long ago, when I told her, "I'm going to the League, Momma!" She'd said I could do anything I wanted as long as I believed—believed in myself, and believed in God. I closed my eyes and prayed.

"Count down from 100," said the nurse, injecting something into my IV. I made it to 98. When I awoke, my shoulder was bandaged up and my arm was in a sling. I couldn't move it at all. Several of my teammates and friends came to the hospital to offer support, and I felt the love from my team of brothers. After a little while, I needed to use the restroom. Often, we take for granted the hundreds of movements we make during the day, and I swung my legs off the side of the bed so I could stand up. It was then that I felt the pain of the surgery. My legs were wobbly and I almost fell from the pain medications they'd given me through IV. Just days ago, I was strong and fast. Today, I could hardly walk to the bathroom.

The doctors sent me home with more meds in pill form and a list of rules to follow—don't move my arm at all, and don't get it wet when I take a shower, to name a few. How could I shower but not get a full side of my upper torso wet? It was a tough task. I would utilize the redshirt year that I hadn't needed as a freshman, which would allow me to play the following year as a 5th year senior—that is, if I recovered. *You gon' box or you gon' boogaloo?* I can't dance, Unc. Hand me the gloves.

Rehab started right away. A strength coach guided me in early-morning sessions, sometimes with other injured players and sometimes one-on-one. Any sudden movement brought spasms of pain, but I had to push through and train so I could get healthy. The year consisted of school, rehab, and fatherhood. As a redshirt player, I was not required to travel to away games, so I visited home more often than I had since I'd moved to Indiana. So, there was a silver lining—I spent much more time with my son and was able to watch my younger brother play in high school games, pleasures I would not have had an opportunity for had I been healthy.

As I healed up, my teammates were playing some very good football. The Cardinals finished over .500, our best season since I'd come to Ball State. We finished 7-5 and were invited to play in the International Bowl in Canada, the first NCAA Bowl Game held on foreign soil, and our first postseason bowl game appearance since 1996. It was a great accomplishment for the university and a step in the right direction for our football program. All those years of planting seeds of hard work were beginning to bear beautiful fruit. I had never been prouder to finally have a winning season, and the bowl game invitation was sweet icing on the championship cake. Unfortunately, I couldn't travel to Canada, but I cheered them on from Detroit. For me, the prosperous winning season was bittersweet. I was proud of my team, but a tiny bit jealous. Hearing the crowd scream for them while I sat on the sidelines made me work even harder to get my body healthy again.

My injury, though, was not the reason I was forced to watch the bowl game on television instead of in person. My grades were still good, but without football, I had too much spare time, and I spent some of it doing things contrary to the future I had planned for myself as a professional athlete, loving father, and community servant and leader. Prior to the bowl game, the university issued random drug screenings. I was selected, and my test came back positive for marijuana. What followed was one of the most embarrassing circumstances of my life thus far.

Undergoing a three month suspension from all team activities was only the start, to follow, the university required me to attend drug counseling every week. Mandatory drug addiction class! This was by far my biggest mishap and telling my family the exact reason I was unable to travel and enjoy the bowl game festivities with my brother hurt worse than any physical pain. I could see and feel their disappointment. And when the team was back on campus when my teammates would make plans to hang out after class or meet for lunch before some sort of team activity, I would have to say, "I'll meet you guys after counseling," as if I was really addicted to drugs. After the season-ending injury, those mandatory weekly drug counseling visits, and my classification as a 'dope fiend' for smoking weed, were salt rubbed into an open wound. I was humiliated.

My counselor was a respectable guy, though. I told him all about my life and my goals, and he also checked my grades.

At the end of the fourth session, he asked, "Why are you in counseling?"

"I don't know, sir," I answered, "I'm still trying to figure it out."

He shook his head a little. "You don't have a drug addiction. This will be our last session together."

I nearly cried. A huge weight lifted off my shoulders, not only because I wouldn't have to go to the humiliating sessions again while my friends hung out, but also because I felt vindicated. I knew I didn't have a problem, and the expert agreed. I shook his hand and thanked him, and then went to meet up with my friends. It was a good day.

And then, another setback. One week before my 21st birthday, after a night of partying with my teammates en route to my apartment, I saw blue lights in the rearview. I pulled over, put the car in *Park*, and gripped the wheel. Just when I thought I'd finished making stupid decisions, I get caught driving after a night of drinking. I was in *the easiest thing to get into and the hardest thing to get out of*. Big Trouble. I was arrested for DUI, and through the university I obtained a lawyer who arranged a deal that would be in my favor. Because I'd had no prior legal troubles, I received only a year of probation, community

service, and another team suspension. Team suspension meant no team workouts, film, or practices. I did all those things alone at 5am every morning.

I did have the opportunity to have my record expunged of the charges if I satisfied all of the demands without any more setbacks. Those demands included biweekly meetings with my probation officer, clean alcohol and drug tests, and 600 hours of community service. The last condition I met gladly, serving more hours at the Boys and Girls Clubs in the city of Muncie, where I'd already been volunteering for quite some time. I couldn't wait to finish my legal trouble, get healthy, and get back on the field. I wanted nothing more than to do what I loved, but there were more problems to come.

Finally, my arm healed, and my record was clean. I was ready to put it behind me and be on my way. And then, while drinking my gallon of water in the locker room, preparing for a 6a.m. team winter workout, university officials entered and conducted random drug testing. I wasn't worried—a long time had passed since I smoked any marijuana. Surprisingly, a few days later a coach told me I'd failed the test. I couldn't believe it; it had to be a mistake! I called my previous drug counselor, the one who'd dismissed me after four sessions, and asked him to administer a test for me. He agreed. Two days later, he called me to his office, where he handed me a paper that listed six different drugs he'd tested me for, one being cannabis, and each followed by the word *Negative*.

"You're clean!" he said.

I felt vindicated and relieved. "Thank you, sir," I said, took the paper and showed it to my coach.

"Can I appeal the other test?" I asked.

He looked at the paper and nodded. "Yes. We will hold a hearing in one week."

I came to the hearing prepared. I carried a folder filled with letters of recommendation from a professor, an academic advisor, administrators from the Boys and Girls Club, and my drug counselor, along with the negative drug test the counselor had performed. But I was prepared mentally, too. At the hearing, I spoke about my son and the rest of my family, my injury, my suspensions and every reason for them, my push to graduate early, everything. I shared my academic and athletic experiences as well as my goals for the future. I was sure to own up to my past mistakes and my determination not to make them again. But I didn't just speak of the *What*; I elaborated on the *Why*. Why I wanted to succeed, why I could be trusted. I finished my speech satisfied. I thought I'd represented myself well, and I believed the negative drug test was my ace-in-the-hole. I was certain that the judgment would be reversed. It wasn't. The failed test and suspension were upheld, and I would face another three months denied team activities. I was utterly disappointed, but I dug deep and examined myself closely. I'd worked so hard all my life, and my family had invested so much in me. I knew I would never do anything else to jeopardize the future I'd been working so hard towards.

I was reinstated just in time for the spring football game. I'd missed all of spring practice, but like my uncle had advised, I'd *stayed* ready, so I didn't have to *get* ready. The seniors were split up, and we had a draft for the juniors and other underclassmen. Each player on the winning team would be rewarded with huge 30 ounce steaks at the team BBQ afterwards; the losers would be fed chicken. And I did love steak—but the real reward, of course, were the bragging rights. My team won, and I was thrilled with my first victory in

months. It felt so good to be back on the field. We'd earned first draft pick, and as a result got our hands on our starting quarterback who would later be an NFL draft pick. Although it had been a while since I'd set my goal of 10 tackles and a turnover per game, I didn't forget it—I achieved that goal and beamed with pride. It was my 5th year and my first time in padded team activities since my injury. I'd been so worried about how well I would recover, and it felt amazing to know I was picking right up where I left off, making the most crucial defensive plays for our team. I was back.

Excited and free, ready to have the best season of my life, I knew the world would soon know the name Wendell Brown. I'd been through so much and learned a lot, and it felt like I needed to do something special to commemorate it. The trip to the tattoo parlor was one I'd thought about for months. To remind me of the past and also the golden road that lay ahead, I commissioned an angel wing on each side of my scar from the pectoral surgery, with a halo over the top. In a weird way, I was somewhat grateful for the injury. Because of it, I appreciated my path in life even more. Because of it, I understood my own resilience. All the recent lows, all the obstacles that had served as an impediment to my progress as an athlete and as a man, they were just tests. I knew all of it had to have a bigger purpose, and even though I didn't see it at the time I was experiencing it, I knew it had to be a blessing in disguise.

Now that I was whole again, I hit the ground running. Against the advice of my coach to take easy courses and glide through to graduation, I had taken the qualifying exam for graduate school and been admitted. I'd been working so hard the past several years, dealing with adversity yet not allowing my studies to suffer. Slowing down now when I was so close made no sense to me. To me, it was a win/win. It was another silver lining to the pectoral muscle injury—the redshirt year allowed me to play my final year of collegiate football while being on full scholarship. My mother and uncle had always stressed academics first, so the decision to push for a master's degree was an easy decision. Before I could graduate with my bachelors degree, I had to complete a 3 month internship program. I chose to intern with the Delaware County Probation Office. I was now in the same building, conducting the same biweekly meetings I had been a part of for a full year prior, yet I was now sitting on the other side of the desk.

I spent two weeks at home in Detroit, spending time with my son and the rest of my family, then went straight back to Ball State for training. A few weeks later, my entire family loaded up their cars and drove the four hours from Detroit, Michigan to Muncie, Indiana, for a very special day. It was July 19, 2008, and I was officially becoming a college graduate. Seeing my family in the stands as I sat with the other graduates filled me with great anticipation; and when my name was called, I felt the same exhilaration as I did when I made a huge play on the football field that sent the crowd into a frenzy. But this time, it wasn't strangers I cared to excite; it was my family, screaming and hooting with pride and support that filled my heart and soul with joy. Wearing my black cap and gown, I took the stage and collected my diploma. I was now a graduate of Ball State University, with a degree of Bachelor of Arts in Criminal Justice. I was proud of my accomplishment, and thrilled that my family was there to see it happen.

I would be the only student-athlete at the university that year on the path to pursue their master's degree, while also participating in college athletics. I would start working towards obtaining my Masters Degree in Political Science in the fall. I spent the day

celebrating, but then it was back to work. Football season was about to start. The team was developing well and coming off a 7-win season with a bowl game appearance, I knew this would be our greatest season yet.

Football camp began, and I noticed I wasn't listed as a starter. I didn't worry too much, knowing I was the best at the position and confident my talents would move me up the depth chart after coming back from an injury. But as camp drew to a close and our first game approached, I noticed that I wasn't allowed many defensive reps in practice, nor was I on any special teams. I was baffled. I'd been the best player at my position since the day I set foot on campus, and it didn't make any sense. During the first game of my senior season, I stood next to the head coach the entire game, waiting for him to put me in. It never happened. I was extremely disappointed.

But I have never been a complainer. Instead, I worked even harder in practice, hustling, grinding, running, hitting; always on my A-game, always positive, always leading. With the small amount of plays available to me, I made my presence felt. I went all the way on every play, some days my teammates asked me to slow down. But that was not the way I saw my 5th and final year going. I was supposed to be leading the team in tackles and turnovers; that was my goal, so I could get picked up by the NFL. I needed that shield—for me, for my son, and for my family. In my mind, I was literally fighting for my life.

Games 2 and 3 came and went. For the first time in my career, my collegiate team was 3-0; but although I was happy for the team, my happiness was severely dampened. In the first three games, I didn't take the field for even a single play. My teammates needed my support, so I cheered them on from the sidelines. But beneath my smile lay a sad, heavy heart.

That season was nothing like the previous year, where I was unable to play due to injury. I was the fastest, strongest, most athletic linebacker on the team, yet I didn't touch the field beyond warmups. I asked my coach what I had to do to get some playing time. He said to continue to work hard and continue leading, and I would be on the field in the upcoming weeks. And so I did. But the weeks drug by, and I never saw the field. Even my practice time was shortened—I wasn't given any reps in practice, and once warmups and individual period were over, so was my day. During practice, during games, I watched from the sidelines, feeling ridiculous in my cleats, shoulder pads, and helmet. It started to feel less like a uniform, and more like a costume.

It was killing me. All I'd ever wanted to do, since I was six years old, was play football for the NFL. But how could scouts, general managers, and teams select me when they couldn't even see me play? Was I not good enough anymore? What was wrong with me? I'd had sky-high goals—but maybe I'd flown a little too close to the Sun.

Many nights, I called home crying. My mother's sweet voice was a refuge, and I hung on her words eagerly, trusting in her wisdom and fortitude. She told me not to worry, that this would not be my last year playing football, that I needed to keep training hard and studying hard, and that everything would work out. But I couldn't hear her. All I knew is I wasn't playing and I felt I should have been.

I also looked for help and support from Superman, but the conversations with my uncle only served to make me feel worse. "Stop crying," he would say, "all of this is your own fault." I was hurt beyond words. He'd always been on my side, my biggest cheerleader. But I didn't see how any of this was my fault. "You repeatedly made horrible decisions! You

opposed the entire university! You're the reason you aren't playing right now and you're lucky they didn't send your ass home!" I'd always hung onto every word my uncle uttered my whole life but not those, my young eyes were closed to that truth.

I tried everything I could to prove I was worthy of playing time. I asked for scout team reps, just to have something to do during team practice. I figured it would hurt less knowing I won't play but at least practicing, than being there just to watch. The coaches allowed me to play on the scout team as linebacker, and I played hard every day like it was a game. That first week I was awarded Scout Team Player of the Week; it was nice, it proved that I was indeed still a great ballplayer and everyone got to see it. My level of play was far beyond those who played over me and because of this, my scout team reps were cut completely. I could untie my cleats and unstrap my helmet and shoulder pads; none of them would be used at practice.

I continued to ask my coaches about playing time; they continued to tell me the same things. "Keep leading and You'll play, just be ready." We were beating teams by 2 and 3 and 4 touchdowns, and the garbage minutes – the closing minutes of blowout victories – ticked by without my name being called. Even the walk-on players who never got minutes played when I didn't. I felt like I was dying.

My funk deepened. The Cardinals were undefeated, but I couldn't be around my teammates because I didn't feel like I was even on the team. I began to drink and smoke marijuana every day, and I got skinny even though I was still lifting. I started sleeping through my morning classes because my body was constantly fatigued from stress. My body ached, even though I wasn't doing any hitting. Alcohol and marijuana eased my pain, replacement friends for the brothers I felt I'd lost on the team. I showed up for mandatory meetings and practice, but I did just enough to get by. I knew I was having a hard time, but I had no idea then how severe my suffering was. My depression was crippling.

Thanks be to God, there was a bright spot in the clouds. The Cardinals traveled to Toledo for an away game, and my family made the 40-minute drive to watch us play. It would only be their 2nd time attending—watching me sit on the bench was difficult for them as well. After weeks of depression, God knows I needed to see them there, to offer their love, support, and comfort. I often looked to the stands and found them, all dressed in red and black, an oasis in the desert. I waved, and my little son recognized me and pointed and smiled. My heart burst with joy and pride—joy because my son was there, and pride because out of all the players, so far away and all wearing the same uniform, he saw and recognized me. At that moment, I prayed to God. *Please, God. Just one play. Let my son hear his own name over the loudspeaker, just once.* Like so many times before, God heard my prayers. The coach put me in for a full drive, which turned into 5 plays. After so, so long away from the field – from my injury to my suspension to my relative ostracism – those were the most intense plays of my life. I stepped on the field ready and inspired by my family and my son. And Wendell Brown Jr. got to hear his name over the loudspeaker—three times.

Another bright spot in my last season was that my team won our first 12 games, and at the end of the season we were ranked #12 in the nation. It was a huge feat—the best season in the school's history. We'd built this team almost from the ground up, saw it through every step, and now tasted the sweet fruit of our labors. With a 12-0 record, we headed to the conference championship game at Ford Field in Detroit, Michigan. There was no place I'd rather be to win the big game than in my hometown, in front of my friends

and family. I couldn't wait.

The Cardinals started strong, and at halftime we led Buffalo 10-7. After a quick pep talk in the locker room from the coach, we took the field again, confident in our win. But the second half did not go well at all. Ball State lost by 3 possessions, and our opportunity to win the MAC conference championship trophy was ruined. I didn't clock a single minute in the game. In front of my entire family and friends in my hometown, I sat on the sidelines and watched my team lose. It was heartbreaking. As moderate consolation, our undefeated regular season earned us an invitation to play in a bowl game after New Year's Day.

The depression consumed me. As playing time and practice time slowed and then came to a screeching halt, so did my studies. I stopped going to class and my grades suffered tremendously. That year was by far the hardest of my life to that point. I had never ridden the bench in my life—I was always a starter, always a leader. My first year, we were a terrible 2-win team, but I was an emotional leader even then, and would have been recognized by NFL scouts if our team had won enough games to get any attention. Ironically, after all those growing pains of being a star on a losing team, now that we were making national noise I had no role to play. How could team scouts put me on their draft boards if they couldn't even see me play? The despondency weighed so heavily that I could hardly get out of bed, and soon I would discover the consequences of that.

Just prior to our bowl game, I received my grades. And for the first time in my life, I was academically ineligible to play. It was crushing. Not only because of the lack of playing time but also because I would miss out on the travel experience with my team of brothers. I'd given the team my all during those losing years, and when we were finally winning I had to miss the nationally televised game and vacation for the second straight year. I stayed home and watched from the couch yet again.

I made it through break and returned to campus for spring semester. My first stop as always was to the football stadium and offices. And it was there that I would be in for the biggest surprise of my life. I entered the locker room and walked to my locker—and found my helmet, shoulder pads, cleats, gloves, and playbook gone. Even my nameplate was missing. My locker, my personal little piece of real estate in the stadium, now looked generic, colorless, foreign. I went to the team equipment managers and asked where my things were, and they gave me a black trash bag filled with my things. They didn't know why, they said; they were just told to bag it. All season I'd felt like trash, and they'd shown me that that's exactly what I was.

Dejected and confused, I went to the head coach. "What's going on? Why was my locker cleaned out?" I asked.

With less tact than I thought I deserved, he responded, "When you failed to maintain a 2.0 GPA, and you were ruled academically ineligible, the university no longer had to honor your scholarship. You are no longer part of the team, nor a student at the university. It's time for you to go home."

The words almost knocked me over. *Athletics and academics*, that's what my whole life had been, every minute of every day, practically since I was born. In 15 seconds, this man had just told me I'd lost both in an instant. I tried to keep my head up, but it was entirely too heavy to hold. With chin to chest, I said, "Okay, Coach," and walked out of his office. I'd never been so crushed in my life. What about the NFL? My dreams, my goals? Taking care of my family, my son? It was all gone. Not even a Pro Day to get in front of the NFL scouts.

The tears began to flow and I couldn't stop them. I didn't even try. I'd just watched my NFL dreams blow up, and I sat in the car and cried, staring at the flames.

Chapter Five

THE NFL DIDN'T CALL

*Your talents and God- given gifts will only take you so far.
Your mindset, how hard you work, your character, and how you treat others,
will take you the rest of the way.*
-Wendell L. Brown Sr.

The pre-recorded instrumental music, heavy with trumpets and drums, blares over the loudspeaker and jolts me from my slumber. I have heard the song before, but it takes me several moments to recognize it: the national anthem of the People's Republic of China, bellowing at top volume throughout the prison cell and beyond. It is meant as a wake-up call, and it serves its purpose well.

Each inmate folds his blanket; all the makeshift beds are removed and stacked in a corner. The blaring music continues for ten minutes, then stops abruptly. The inner set of bars that trap us in this cell slide open, teasing an unreachable freedom beyond. The inmates now have access to both the inner and outer cell, and many have started their morning grooming routines, but I nearly vomit when I see the water that flows from the faucet. Discolored and fetid, it brings back memories of the first hotel I stayed in when I arrived here in China. I am no microbiologist, but I can almost see the swarming, toxic organisms, eager to multiply and to spread their poison inside the fertile terrain of my stomach and intestines.

The other inmates grab bowls and spoons and exit into the outer cell, and I follow their lead. A loud banging on the steel door prompts the inmates to form a line in front of a hole in the wall the size of a human hand. The hole's covering slides away and an arm reaches in from the other side, holding a bowl filled with a white, watery substance, which is dumped one by one into each inmate's bowl. The 'food' looks inedible, worse than the slops fed to pigs on a farm. But the degradation of mealtime is not over. Once everyone's bowl is filled, the disembodied hand reaches through the small hole once more, throwing bread rolls onto the grimy floor. I watch in disbelief as all the other inmates scurry forward to grab a roll, as if a small, tasteless, dirty bit of bread were a prize to be treasured. Perhaps here, I think, it is.

After the rush for rolls, I'm surprised to see that there is one piece left. My survival instinct is conflicted. My stomach growls for nourishment—my brain responds, *But at what cost?* The likelihood of hours of miserable regurgitation, before the calories can even be absorbed, is enough to squash the protests from my empty stomach, and I abstain.

But all around me, the other inmates chew and slurp loudly while carrying on loud and lively conversations. Once again, I see my mother's beautiful face and hear her voice,

this time as she was when I was a child. *Don't talk with your mouth full. It's rude to make noises when you're eating.* In my memory, I glance around my mother's house—clean and tidy, the refrigerator full of fresh, nutritious food and the water faucet pouring clear, clean water. I didn't know it then, but my mother's house was Heaven. And this place is without any doubt, Hell.



"It's time for you to go home," my coach said. Time for me to go home, after an entire life of football practices, drills, workouts, and NFL dreams. Forced into early retirement at the age of 22. I packed my things quickly, said a few goodbyes, and headed home to Detroit.

What was I to do? All my life, all I'd ever wanted to do was play professional football and take care of my family. And now they would have to take care of me. I knew I had to figure something out. Not only did I need to take care of myself, I had to take care of my new son as well. The responsibilities of being a father would not stop just because I had failed to achieve the single most important goal I'd ever set in my life. I had to brush myself off and start again. But where?

As I had so many times before, I asked my uncle for advice. I hadn't finished my master's, but I did still have a bachelor's degree that should prove useful. I cringed when I remembered Unc's advice to get my degree so I'd always have it to fall back on when football was taken away from me. I'd expected that time to come in my late 30s or 40s, when my body could no longer keep up with the young 20-year-olds fresh out of college. I never thought I would need to 'fall back' on my degree for my first career.

It was the first time in my life I'd worked on a résumé. Uncle Raymond helped me a lot, and after a few days I started pounding the pavement. I went door-to-door, specifically looking for establishments where I could use my educational background. The degree served me well, and soon I landed a job as a treatment specialist, working with at-risk youth within a Detroit detention center. I needed the paycheck of course, but it was more than a job to me. I had the opportunity to meet adolescent males and encourage them to lead successful, productive lives. These young men came from the same community as I did and had faced many of the same challenges, but perhaps they'd been denied the same guidance and love that I'd been blessed with growing up. I wanted to provide that guidance for them, to show them they could trust me. They stayed in their cells most of the day, exiting only when they needed to use the restroom, attend meetings with a counselor, participate in on-site activities, or attend school in the mornings. When the courts permitted, I escorted the young men to off-site events like NBA games or the circus, which were rewards for good behavior and good grades. I treasured the time with them, knowing it was good for their morale to spend time outside of the locked-down facility. I monitored them, but more importantly, I mentored them. I tried to teach them respect for themselves and for others, discipline, and the importance of sound decision-making. I hoped that my positivity would transfer to them, helping them reach their full potential.

Though I was still hurting about how my football career ended, I never forgot my love for the game. I went back to King High School where the coaching staff welcomed me to coach with them. I coached linebackers and special teams, and I helped with academic advisory to ensure the student-athletes qualified academically to attend college. I strove to

serve not only as a coach and mentor but also as an example, as I'd followed much the same path they were now walking on and had been successful at it. Their goal was to play Division 1 football and earn a degree, all on scholarship; I'd had the same goal, and had achieved it. Wendell Jr. was residing with me and accompanied me to practice daily. I reveled in watching him running around having fun on the field, enjoying the game that I loved so much and that had granted me so many blessings.

As it turned out, filling out so many applications and going door-to-door worked even further in my favor. Shortly afterward, I was hired as a lawyer's assistant, responsible for file organization and purging in addition to some case research and other various duties. I also accompanied lawyers to court hearings and took notes in mediation, workers' compensation cases, and motions hearings. I loved learning legal procedures and loved getting paid to do it. I wore a suit every day to the office in downtown Detroit. I had my own desk and phone number, and I even recorded my own voicemail message on my first day. I was young and now had real jobs, good jobs, and making good money. But I wasn't happy at all. I wasn't doing what I was born to do, and I knew it.

My schedule was packed. I changed it around in order to work at the law firm from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m., then spent time with little Wendell until 5:30 when practice started at the high school. I left practice at 8 p.m., grabbed a quick dinner with Wendell before putting him to bed, kissing him on the head, and leaving home for my overnight shift at the detention center from 11-7. I barely slept. I took short naps after practice and though it was against the center's rules, I also took short naps at the detention center between my duties—the detainees were locked in their rooms, so there was no security risk. I missed my son, and I had almost no free time whatsoever. It was tough, but my family came through for me and helped take care of Wendell while I worked and his mother was at school.

I was feeling lost, still lamenting the deprivation of the NFL dreams I'd had since I was a young child. And then one day, something strange happened. I arrived in downtown Detroit and walked toward the firm for my day of work. I saw an older woman who appeared to be homeless. Her face was dirty, and her long, gray hair was unkempt. It was nearly 80 degrees that day, yet she wore a dark gray puffer coat that reached past her knees. She pushed a shopping cart full of her belongings, and I felt concerned for her.

"Do you need any help?" I asked. "Are you hungry?"

Instead of answering, she asked me my name.

"It's Wendell," I said.

Her expression changed. "Your name is in the Bible," she said, and handed me something—a small rock, with a message taped to it: *Expect a Miracle*.

I wasn't sure what to make of it, but I thanked her, and she thanked me back, although she hadn't taken any of the money I offered for food. I glanced down at the rock again, and when I looked up she was gone—disappeared into thin air, like a wisp on the wind.

In the following days I looked for her, hoping to talk to her again. Every time I exited the building, I looked around, hoping for a glimpse of that long gray hair or that old black coat, but she was nowhere to be found. I never saw her again.

I searched the Bible many times but never found my name in it. I never stopped thinking about the woman and her well-being, her words, and the little rock that read *Expect a Miracle*.

I was 23 with a full year of work experience and high-school coaching experience under my belt since leaving Ball State University. One of my former teammates from Ball State knew I was coaching and asked if I was interested in interviewing for a position as a linebacker coach at Adrian College in Adrian, Michigan. I agreed immediately. It would be my first interview for a coaching position, but I was ready for it. At their request, I explained fronts, gaps, and each position's responsibility, then drew up a few defenses on a white board in front of a few staff members. I aced the interview, like I knew I would. If there was anything I knew, it was football.

The staff showed me around campus and introduced me to the athletic director, the rest of the football staff, and the other sports team's coaches. I was excited. It was a huge opportunity for me, to be so young and have a full-time college coaching position. They moved me into an apartment on campus, and I started right away, helping create the off-season winter workout and conditioning schedule. I also served as academic advisor for the linebacker position and for all incoming freshmen on the football team, a job I had experience with from my time coaching at King High.

Keeping in mind my mother and uncle's advice, I stressed the importance of academic progress. I scheduled a weekly meeting with each of the players, checking on their grades to make sure they would be eligible to participate in sports and stay on path to graduate. I orchestrated team-building techniques and provided leadership and support while serving as a resource for our players and even some other students who weren't on the team. I knew my job didn't stop with the team—I felt responsible to help all the young men I could to be successful employees, citizens, fathers, and husbands, although I wasn't much older than they were. They were learning self-discipline, sportsmanship, camaraderie, self-respect, and how to trust others, along with all the football skills they learned and honed. I stressed the importance of responsibility and accountability, and my personal experience was instrumental in relaying those messages to them.

Another beautiful part of coaching at the collegiate level was the opportunity to recruit young men from my hometown of Detroit. I'd walked in their shoes, and I used my experience to help alter the trajectory of their lives in a positive way. I took great pride in being the only African American coach on staff, and even more so because I was responsible for the recruiting process pertaining to all of the African-American families whose sons considered being a part of our team and college. I helped generate interest in them and get them comfortable with the college and our staff. Our biggest signing of the national letter of intent of our best athletes saw me as the closer, and I felt a sense of accomplishment as not only the only African-American but also the youngest coach on the staff.

I remembered not being sure if I even wanted to be around the game of football any longer, when my coach threw my belongings into a black trash bag and told me to go home. But now I was back around the game. I was learning a lot and enjoying every minute. Being close in age to the players, and being emotionally accessible to them, I quickly gained their trust. Those young men, both Black and white, responded to me differently from the way they reacted to the other coaches and the relationships I built with them were the source of many jokes in our coaches' meetings, but I knew my purpose for being there, and I could take a little ribbing. And I would soon learn just how important those relationships were.

One day I spoke to a player from Detroit whose family was having some difficulties. He considered going back home to help support them, and I was deeply concerned because his distress was affecting both his athletic and academic performance. I saw myself in this young man, being young and Black from an inner city, and now finding himself at a predominantly white school, trying to fit in and find his way. I spoke to him about the importance of where he currently was and how college was the best place for him at that time, remembering my uncle's similar advice to me, and how right he was. I gave him suggestions about how to relieve his anxiety, advice I wished I'd had just a few years earlier. We talked for nearly an hour. In confidence, he shed some tears, a cathartic release that he surely needed, safe in the presence of someone who understood, supported, and loved him. He left strengthened. I delighted in knowing, I'd achieved my goal.

As I left my cubicle I ran into the head coach. His response both surprised and irritated me. Instead of asking how the young man was doing, he said, "Don't waste your time on that kid!"

I was stunned, but I maintained my composure. "Why would you say that, Coach?"

"That kid isn't going to amount to much," he responded.

His attitude greatly annoyed me and I felt personally disrespected. I couldn't believe that a white man would tell me, a Black man, not to support a young Black man going through troubled times. *This is the man that a set of parents has entrusted their child to*, I thought. And then I thought of my own college experience. I realized that some coaches just didn't care about the players personally, only about their performance on the field. Going forward, I viewed that coach differently, and I vowed to make my presence known to the players even more than I had before. They were far from home and needed someone to love them and help them conquer any adversity they came upon. I coached them hard, but made sure I extended myself even more off the field.

It was hard to free up more time during the day to lend an ear to troubled players, but I made it work. I started holding group meetings where we could talk about anything, football related or not. I'd always felt everything about sports reflected everything about life, teaching us valuable life lessons, so during training sessions, I began to push and encourage our players even more, motivating them to progress past their pain both on and off the field. I wore my cleats to practice daily, to demonstrate exactly how the drills should be done. Seeing that I was both talk *and* action motivated my players even more. But the blessings weren't just for them—I felt blessed as well. Their success was my success; their dreams were my dreams.

Coaching reminded me just how much fun it was to play football—the brotherhood, the focus, the strategy, the hard work, and everything else I loved about the game. It rekindled in me the fire that had once been squashed out. I missed it, and I was ready to strap 'em up again. I loved coaching, but now I wanted to get back on that field and play.

During a down week, I went back home to Detroit for a visit. It was a much-needed break from my demanding schedule and a chance to spend leisurely time with my son without the interruptions on campus. I was so happy to see the rest of my family, whom I hadn't seen in months. But it wasn't all play time—I still had a job to do. I visited a few schools to do some recruiting and got a few bites, and I was pleased with the prospects. I also participated in a semi-pro football practice in Detroit and enjoyed myself so much that I asked if I could play.

“We wanted to ask you to play as soon as you came on the field,” they said. “We have a game Saturday. See you then?”

I happily agreed and 2 days later, I arrived with everything I needed except a uniform and a helmet, which they provided. I suited up, and the old familiar feeling of strapping on the shoulder pads and lacing up the pants brought a feeling of euphoric nostalgia, a feeling that at once seemed both strange and familiar. I pulled on my helmet and took a picture with my cell phone just to see how I looked. Seeing myself in full uniform brought a rush of emotion. I was ready to play some ball.

That game was the most fun I’d had playing football since I was a kid, and what made it even better was that Wendell Jr. was right there with me, on the sideline, in his full Detroit Lions uniform. I ran as fast and tackled just as hard as I ever had. And when I left the field that day, I knew I would play again—but at high level. I made my mind up—I wasn’t done with the game just yet, and I was still going to the League. My next stop was the NFL.

On the way back to Adrian, I thought about a plan. NFL scouts hadn’t seen me play in years, so I needed a way to get in front of them. I had a good relationship with one of my former college coaches, so I contacted him and asked if he could send me some film. With 3 full seasons of starts and top-5 finishes in tackles, I figured I’d have enough film for a decent highlight tape. The coach agreed and within weeks I received the film directly to my desk at the football office. I noticed the game film from my freshman through junior year did not include any special teams footage, so I decided to make a small highlight tape using only junior season games. But I needed more. I began to look for other teams I could play for to get more film. I hadn’t played in over 2 years, and the NFL didn’t know my name. I needed to prove I belonged in the NFL—and I would do it by playing my way in.

I found out about an arena team – the Cincinnati Commandos in Cincinnati, Ohio – that had a workout on the upcoming weekend. I checked my schedule and saw that I was free, so I packed my cleats and drove to Cincinnati for the team’s free-agent workout. It was pro-day testing, consisting of a 40-yard dash, shuttle, L-drill, and position-specific drills. If I’d let myself fall out of shape, my performance would have been far from impressive. But I’d *stayed* ready, so I didn’t have to *get* ready. I ran a pretty good 40 and did great in both linebacker and defensive back drills, and before the workout was even complete the head coach offered me a contract to play on their team. A shot of adrenaline rushed through my body. Earning a paycheck for play meant I would technically be a professional football player. The salary was only \$300 a game, but I wasn’t doing it for the money. I needed the exposure and the film to get me closer to earning an NFL opportunity. I couldn’t wait to demonstrate my talents. The world may have forgotten me, but soon they would be reminded.

I began to approach everything differently. With my eyes on the prize, I pushed myself even harder in recruiting and coaching. No one at Adrian College knew I was leaving yet, and I wanted to leave on good terms. After a full year of college coaching experience, I wrote my letter of resignation, thanking the school president, coaching staff, and players for the experience. I had served my purpose on Adrian College’s campus. It was time to move on—and I was *Expecting a Miracle*.

Chapter Six

BALLER FOR LIFE

*O LORD, you are my God; I will exalt you and praise your name,
for in perfect faithfulness you have done marvelous things,
things planned long ago.
-Isaiah 25:1*

No one here speaks English. In times past, having no one to talk to would have bothered me; but here, in this cell full of Chinese criminals, I cherished the small bit of isolation. I sit in the back of the cell alone, observing. Other inmates gamble, argue, and fight all around me. I am determined to keep to myself. Some of the men try to talk to me, but I don't understand a single word. As it may be, I do not think their words are kind.

I look different from everyone else here; I am a spectacle, garnering looks, points, and even laughs from the others. If gathered and channeled, the negative energy directed at me could power this cell, maybe even open the electronic bars and doors that trap me in this hellish captivity. I ignore everyone and talk silently to my only Friend in this place, the Friend who I'm certain will soon deliver me back to the waiting arms of my mother. My mouth is silent, but inside my head I am screaming, begging Him to hear me. *Deliver me, Father. I trust in You. Please save me from this place.,*



Like Lazarus, my football career was being raised from the dead. I signed the contract for the Commandos in Cincinnati, the first step of what I hoped – and *knew* – would be my path to the NFL I believed it, and my family believed it. And, I worked with intent and purpose.

The team housed me and three other out-of-state players at a hotel, which offered a free continental breakfast; dinner was also covered by three local restaurants at the expense of the team. Still, I worried about how I would stretch my \$300/week salary. So after a few weeks of scraping by, I walked to the Meijer next door to the hotel and filled out an application.

The manager looked at me strangely. “You know you’re over-qualified for our available positions,” he said.

“Yes, sir,” I answered, and explained the severity of my situation, that I needed money to send home for my son and I wasn’t making enough to support him.

So it was that a few days later, I donned my red shirt and took my place at the customer service desk, doing returns, Western Unions, checks, and lottery. The manager accommodated me by allowing me to work mornings so I could make practices and games, but when I got my first paycheck, only \$27 was left after I paid child support. On the walk back to the hotel, I debated if it was worth it, but I quickly came to the conclusion that the whole reason I got the job was to take care of my son. The money was ultimately going to the right place, so I kept waking up early—and child support kept taking all the money. But

it was a means to an end.

I began to notice unexplained hostility from the locals. Random civilians blew their horns at me and shot me the middle finger while I drove through town. I mentioned it to a teammate, and he had some insight—the Michigan plates on my car. Growing up watching football, I was well aware of the biggest rivalry in sports between Michigan and Ohio State, but I never thought that that dislike would spill into people’s everyday lives. Wasn’t that just posturing for game day? Apparently not. Even the head coach made remarks about Michigan vs. Ohio State players, but I responded by saying I hadn’t gone to either school and didn’t understand the importance of the comparisons and how they would help us win. But he didn’t let up.

One day I’d had enough. After yet another snide comment from the head coach, I blurted out, “Your best player is the only one from Michigan.” The head coach did not like that. He began to put my name on the list to be released every week, but every week the team’s owner disallowed it. Luckily for me, the owner cared more about winning than he did about some petty rivalry.

The team owner welcomed and oriented the out-of-state players, including me. He often invited us to his home to watch games or just hang out. He knew we had no family and few friends in town, other than each other, and his warmth spoke volumes about the kind of person he was. He even paid me during bye weeks so that I’d have enough money to send home for my son and to travel home to see him.

Although the Commandos owner succeeded in securing a roster spot on the team for me, I didn’t start or even play in every game. I knew I really had to perform in the small amount of playing time I got because I needed the film for the NFL. With my limited role on the team I earned a few Continental Indoor Football League (CIFL) Defensive Player of the Week awards, and our team won the CIFL League Championship with a stellar record of 14-0. Despite having played in only 12 games and starting in only 5, I led the league in tackles per game and gathered some great film, showing I could play fast and be productive. I thanked the owner for his kindness and for the opportunity and collected the film to help me shop around for other teams. I’d done well, but there was much more work to be done.

I had completed my first season as a pro athlete, but I had no idea where to go next. I had no agent and only one year of film after college under my belt, and that for a lower-level arena team. Like always, when I needed direction, I went to my uncle Raymond. Tearfully, I explained my fears, my dreams, and my uncertainties.

“I don’t want to just live a regular life,” I told him. “I want to go to the League.”

He looked at me calmly. “Don’t worry about anything. You will be playing.”

And just a few weeks later, I was introduced to a man who would change my life. His name was Thomas White, a short but muscular light-skinned Black man whom I met through one of my mentors. Thomas asked what my goals were, and of course, as always, I responded that I wanted to play NFL football. “I can show you the way to get there, but you will have to be the one to do the work” he responded. I was never one to be afraid of hard work.

Thomas was a former collegiate football player and an Olympic sprinter, still just as fast and strong as in his days of competing. He was one of the best trainers in America, and by far the most underrated. He showed me how to train, how to eat, and even introduced me to my first agent. Knowing I had a real trainer and real representation propelled me to

push even harder to prepare myself mentally and physically for my next opportunity.

The training was crucial, but the daily 45-minute drive was hard on my finances. And then I received a great gift. Thomas believed in me, and knowing my struggle he generously offered for me to move into his home with his family for a few months. The gift was beneficial in so many ways—not only was he training me more often, but he also monitored me regarding the strict diet plan he'd created for me and his other athletes. Every athlete he trained improved greatly in just a few weeks, getting bigger, stronger, and faster. It was the opportunity of a lifetime, and I couldn't wait to get started.

Thomas had another one of his athletes in his guest bedroom so some nights I slept on the couch and other nights it was the floor, but I was grateful nonetheless. My speed and strength improved and I cut a great deal of body fat, weighing 238 pounds and running a consistent 4.4-second 40-yard dash. I lifted 225 pounds 35 times on the bench press. He trained me as a defensive back instead of a linebacker, a strategic move. He was transforming me into an all-around athlete, better prepared than I'd ever been in my life.

Thomas and my new agent made plans to get me and the other athletes out of the Detroit snow for the winter, flying us all out to Orlando to train in the 90-degree January heat. Of the 9 of us, 4 had previous professional experience, 3 had just graduated college, and the other 2 were still in college. We stayed in a 7-bedroom, 4-bath house with an indoor pool and hot tub, a veritable mansion to us inner-city kids from Detroit. We played a little, but we were serious about our training. Every day there was heavy competition among us—who could squat or bench the most, who could run the fastest 10-, 20-, or 40-yard dash, who could catch the most passes in one-on-one drills. It was a friendly rivalry, but a rivalry nonetheless. We all took turns cooking, but my comfort around the kitchen led to me cooking more than others. The athlete with the slowest 40 each day had to wash dishes. We didn't mind the chore necessarily, but each of us were born competitors who hated losing. We ran hard, and some achieved times of 4.3 and even 4.2 in the 40. Competition is indeed a great motivator.

The defensive-back training honed a new set of skills. I worked on playing in space, improving both my zone and man coverage, in addition to hip mobility and ball skills. My weaknesses became strengths. I was ecstatic about the future, particularly now with representation from an agent who had helped many players get signed with Arena 1, Canadian Football League, and NFL opportunities. After several offers from arena teams, I decided to play my 2nd season of professional football for an arena team in the IFL located in Bloomington, Illinois—the Edge. They felt I was the missing piece to a championship defense. I was grateful for the opportunity to play in Bloomington for many reasons—the Edge was in a higher arena league than the Commandos, and the coaches on staff there had years of experience and connections with both the CFL and NFL. Plus, it wasn't terribly far from Detroit, only a 6 hour drive. I couldn't wait to get to Bloomington and take the next step toward the League.

I flew from Orlando to Illinois and was picked up at the airport by one of the coaches, who drove me straight to practice. When we arrived practice was already in full swing and I was asked to jump right in. I was told that they were looking for me to play the hybrid position—a mix between linebacker and safety, a position I'd been preparing to play all offseason. After practice, the team met at a restaurant, and the coaches told me there would be a team dinner every night – practice or not – at restaurants with healthy,

high-quality food. After dinner I was taken to my apartment—a 2-bedroom, 2-bath shared space with another athlete I happened to know. I'd played against him in college and we had many mutual friends; he'd played NFL football for a short while and was working to get back there. He'd tasted the fruit, and he wanted more. I could relate.

My first game was only two days later. During that first 48 hours, I studied the playbook hard to learn as much as I could. In the locker room I suited up for the game, and stood in front of the full length mirror for a moment, taking it all in. I looked good and I felt good. I was about to put on a show, besides I was a professional football player, that's what I was paid to do. Soon, everyone would know who the best player in this league was. My dream was so close I could taste it.

In my first game I saw limited action, mostly on special teams, but with a few defensive plays. We won a tight game, and I finished with 6 tackles and a pass breakup. After the game one of the defensive linemen – who'd previously seen some NFL action – shook my hand. “I see why they wanted to dress you so fast,” he said.

I managed to say thank you, but I wasn't quite sure about all the implications of his remark. I imagined some team members were unhappy that the coaches brought me in 4 games into the season. In a way I understood that I needed to prove myself, to show that I was the best defense player on the team. And I intended to do just that.

Over the next 2 games, I racked up 23 tackles, 2 interceptions, 1 forced fumble, and a pass breakup. I also earned one IFL Defensive Player of the Week award, an honor that I took great pride in. But, remembering my uncle's words – *“The eye in the sky don't lie!”* – I trusted not in the stat sheet but in the film.

At the mandatory team meetings, I watched the film carefully to see if I did my job and gave full effort. I also watched the film alone at home, asking myself tough questions. Did I finish every play at or around the ball? Did I make my presence felt? My coaches' standards were tough, but my own standards were 1000 times higher. Not a week went by that I didn't collect the game film, while others waited until the end of the season. I made copies and sent them to my agent and to higher leagues, and I often held meetings with the Bloomington coaches to ask about other teams they had contact with and upcoming workouts for CFL teams. I pushed and grinded, and the coaches knew my drive and my goals and helped me on my path to reaching them. Every morning, I felt myself getting closer to achieving my NFL dreams.

I hadn't planned on finishing my season in Bloomington, but an opportunity didn't come to move up to a higher-level team. I enjoyed the play and the camaraderie. We tried for a championship but finished 10-4, the last loss was a first-round playoff exit. As I'd done at Ball State, I emerged as a leader and was named captain due not only to my playmaking ability but also to my work ethic and capacity to hold my teammates accountable. I led by example and kept my teammates focused on the task at hand, despite what the scoreboard read. My trip back to Detroit at the end of the season was bittersweet—I'd enjoyed playing in Bloomington, but it was time to move on.

I kept in contact with the coaches and front-office personnel who wanted to continue to assist in my advancement. It felt good to have people in the industry who believed in me. I constructed a highlight tape from the film I gathered in Bloomington and got to work. I sent emails to CFL and NFL scouts and personnel, attaching my college and professional film along with my season stats, awards, and a brief bio. But I knew there was

more work to be done. I searched for free-agent workouts, focusing on venues where CFL and NFL scouts might be in attendance. And, as always, I kept in shape—*the hardest thing to get into and the easiest thing to get out of*, according to Uncle Raymond. Close to my apartment was a huge open field where I worked on my speed, agility, and drill work.

The offseason always seemed long and dreadful, and I had a list of responsibilities in which I needed to make money to stay on top of. A shopping plaza nearby held many places of interest—a Planet Fitness, where I could lift and train; but also a Dunham's Sports and Chicago Pizza where I would work and earn money. My friends didn't understand why I didn't get a job using my degree, but I needed to make my own schedule so I could continue to train and travel for free-agent workouts. I worked just enough hours to keep me and my son fed, my bills paid, and to fund my travel expenses as I looked for teams and leagues looking to sign free agents for the next season. I didn't have as much time as I would have liked to work with my trainer because of work, but when I did have time to train with him, I felt right at home and I trained hard. I traveled with Thomas and my brothers for many out-of-town workouts and we demonstrated to all the coaches present that they had yet to see the best unsigned talent in America. I'd sent so many emails and been to so many free-agent workouts in the offseason that CFL coaches now knew me by name and face.

There were a few things that had to take place at free agent camps in order to get noticed by scouts. First, you have to meet the 'eye test'. I passed the 'eye test' each time—weighing anywhere from 235 to 240 pounds on any given day, with 6% body fat. I 'looked' like a football player. If you looked like you could play football, scouts would watch you run the 40; and if they were impressed with your time, they followed you to the next phase of evaluation. I consistently ran a 4.4 and attracted the attention of scouts wanting to watch me in individual drills. And that was where I really shined. In one-on-one competition, I covered both running backs and wide receivers, displaying not only my athletic ability but also my comfort in space with backpedaling, opening my hips, and finding the ball in the air. In the middle of a one-on-one competition period, I'd just made a play breaking up a pass when an arena coach approached me and asked how much I weighed.

"You're big for a corner," he said.

"I'm not a corner, coach," I responded laughing. "I'm a former Division-1 linebacker."

He crossed his arms. "Why aren't you at the other end of the field with the other linebackers?"

With confidence, I responded, "Why aren't the other linebackers down here with me?"

He just smiled, and wrote my name down on a piece of paper before patting me on the back and walking away.

After every workout – in Ohio, Nebraska, Pennsylvania, or Georgia – I left with more and more contacts to call and email my film to. I performed so well that nearly every CFL team extended invitations to one of their upcoming private workouts. These offers were granted only to those athletes that a team wanted to evaluate more closely and limited to 4 to 10 players per position, as opposed to over 100 at free-agent workouts.

I kept in contact with another agent with connections in the two highest leagues as well. He felt I had a great chance for advancement because of my film, my performances at

workouts, and my hunger and consistency with attending camps. And he was right. Upon the start of the next season, I had several offers from arena teams in many different leagues. I remembered the day I retrieved my belongings in a black trash bag from Ball State and how horrible I'd felt that day. It had seemed no one had faith in me then, and I wondered if I'd ever don a uniform again. And now here I was with multiple offers, enough to allow me to negotiate the terms of my contract. I'd been down, but I was standing back up. My only non-negotiable term was that I would be allowed to leave without a problem if a workout or signing opportunity was available from a team in a higher league. Most organizations only wanted what was best for them, not for the athlete, but nothing was going to stop me from getting to the NFL.

My first signing was with the Lehigh Valley Steelhawks in Pennsylvania, against whom I'd played the previous season. The staff was what really sold me—they believed in my goals and wanted to help me achieve them. They flew me into town and housed me in a hotel with other players who were staying for camp. Those who made the final roster would be moved into apartments. We received free breakfast and dinner and a membership to a local gym where we had access to a strength and speed coach outside of practice. We practiced four times per week, and after only two weeks the calls from other teams started coming in.

One day, the head coach and defensive coordinator told me about one particular call, from the Green Bay Blizzard. The Blizzard's practices were held directly across the street from the NFL's Green Bay Packers stadium, and the Packers often sent scouts to check out the budding talent from across the street. I was excited. I told the Blizzard's staff about some of my upcoming events: private workouts with 4 CFL teams, plus an All-Star game, for which I was the oldest player to receive an invitation. They were impressed, and invited me to play with them in Wisconsin. And so, with the blessing of the Lehigh Valley coaches and staff, I packed my cleats and headed to Green Bay.

My first question upon arrival wasn't about the playbook or game day, but instead how often the scouts came over from across the street. Very often, they answered, especially if there was some buzz about some new talent. I wanted to get on the field right away. In my debut game in Chicago the day after my arrival, I made 5 tackles and 1 pass breakup. I also hurt my wrist, but had it taped up on the sideline tight enough to finish the game. The next day, a doctor said I had a hairline fracture in my wrist, but I could play if I wore a cast for five weeks. One week later, I was ready to leave for the All-Star game.

My coaches asked me to stay so I wouldn't miss the next game; It would be my second game and I had yet to fully get a grasp of the playbook but, per my contract, they couldn't require it, and I caught a bus to the 3-day camp. The camp consisted of daily meetings with scouts, team dinners, and school visits. I impressed the scouts, many of whom spoke to me during and after practice those first two days. And then, on the day of the All-Star game itself, I emerged onto the field as defensive captain and spoke on behalf of our team during the coin toss. I was thrilled. It was a good game, even though my team lost. I led the game with 8 tackles, 2 tackles for loss, and a pass breakup. I got more great contacts, more film, and plenty of great feedback. And, I'd done it all with a cast from my forearm to my knuckles. Pain is temporary, pride is forever. I left the field one step closer to wearing that NFL shield.

I traveled back to Green Bay on a cloud. But after I arrived, I encountered a bit of a

surprise. I had no playing time in the next game, none at all. I asked the coaches why.

“The guy in front of you hasn’t done anything to lose his job,” they replied snidely.

Soon I not only missed playing time in games but wasn’t even allowed to dress out for them, and was limited to the practice squad. I was disappointed in what I believed was deception on their part—I gave them my full schedule of upcoming events, they agreed with them and promised to help me achieve my goals, and now they were shunning me. But I’d had a similar experience before, and I was better prepared for the emotions. I wasn’t a kid anymore. I continued to practice hard, despite the ostracization, despite the cast on my arm, and continued to ask for playing time. The coaches kept brushing me off, and deep down I knew why. I had ambitions of being in a better place, and it didn’t sit well with the coaches and the front office. But, I wasn’t going to let that be my problem, not this time. I took their negative energy and let it fuel me with even more fire to demonstrate that they were better with me than without me. Every day, each play, I practiced like I was in a game. I was preparing for something bigger.

My first CFL workout came during a bye week. Many players were going to their hometowns for the week and before I left Green Bay for the private workout, I met with the defensive coordinator to let him know I too would be out of town. I told the coach exactly where I was going, and he seemed excited for me. He told me I would be dressed and playing in the next game. I was pleased, and gave the glory to God for instilling in me a work ethic that showed the coaches who I was.

The defensive coordinator asked, “What is going to happen at your private workout?”

I answered, “I’m going to kill the workout, and Winnipeg is going to offer me a contract.” And I meant it with every ounce of my soul.

I’d been preparing for this moment not only during my time in Green Bay but for years. This workout was my chance to show I belonged at the highest level of play. I glanced down at my arm and frowned. I couldn’t show up looking like damaged goods. The wrist was feeling fine, so I cut the cast off, packed my bag, and headed to catch the Greyhound headed for Atlanta.

On the bus, I got a call from a coach on another team. “Hello Wendell!” he said. “I’m extremely interested in having you come play for our team. We need you here.”

Politely, I responded, “Thank you for your interest, Coach, but I’m currently under contract with Green Bay.”

He paused. “I just received the waiver list for all the leagues, and your name was on it. They released you about an hour ago.”

I was shocked. Not just by the news, but by the delivery. I’d *just* spoken to the defensive coordinator, and he’d mentioned nothing about releasing me. And here I was hearing the news from some random coach I didn’t know. I felt disrespected, but it only added more fuel to that fire. Nobody was going to get me down, especially not someone who couldn’t even sit down man-to-man and tell me the truth.

As I rode on that bus, I thought about everything I’d experienced in my short time in that organization—the hairline fracture, the irritation at watching someone else play my position at 1/1000 of my level, my inquiries about decreased playing time, my being released while on the road. I was obviously not meant to play there, and they had to see that. It was their loss.

I had an uncle who lived in Atlanta, and he picked me up at the bus station and drove me to his house. I loved seeing and spending time with my family, but I was there to work. I was in Atlanta days before the workout so it gave me time to see where the workout was held and even days to warm up, stretch, and envision the exact spot I would stand when I received my contract offer. On the day of the private workout I got to the field early and started my warm up routine and stretched. I'd taped my wrist up for stability and hidden the evidence of the injury. I began the workout by running a 4.46 40 yard dash, and that was exactly what the team's General Manager wanted to see, after hearing about me from scouts and receiving some of my film. After the sprint, the GM himself led me in a few position drills, which was a great sign. I excelled in the one-on-one, not allowing a completion and intercepting a pass. After the workout, I spoke to the GM and the scout who'd invited me, and I got a good feeling from both of them. My first CFL workout was successful—and I had three more to go.

I still planned to go back to Green Bay to retrieve all of my belongings but I went home to Detroit first. Facetiming with my son was getting hard—I needed to hug him. After some catching up with family, I reflected on what I'd accomplished so far and where I still needed to go. Now that I wasn't on a roster anymore, I could focus fully on preparing for the remaining private CFL workouts.

Then my agent called, with the best news I'd heard in years. The Winnipeg Blue Bombers had offered me a CFL contract. I went absolutely wild. I jumped up screaming, kissing and hugging my family members, celebrating in raucous joy. It was the best moment I'd had in a long, long time. I decided to forego all the other private CFL team workouts and take the offer I received. I signed a one-year contract with an option to pick up the second year, base rookie contracts with attainable incentives. I was excited to show this organization that they'd just found a diamond. I still had one more step to go, but while I was in Winnipeg, I was going to shine.

Chapter Seven

AROUND THE WORLD AND BACK

We on an Ultralight Beam, we on an Ultralight Beam!
This is a God dream, this is a God dream!
This is Everything!
-Kanye West

As the plane descended through the clouds, I took in the view of the Canadian skyline in Winnipeg, Manitoba. It was breathtaking—an urban cityscape against a backdrop of gorgeous prairie land, bordered by the Hudson Bay. There were worse places to call home, even if just temporarily. Winnipeg hosted no NFL team, so I knew it was not my last stop. But it was a big step up.

I discovered just how big that step up was a few minutes after we landed. I gathered my luggage from baggage claim and then noticed a tall man in a suit holding a huge whiteboard that read, *WENDELL BROWN – WINNIPEG BLUE BOMBERS*. My heart leapt. I'd only seen this kind of thing on television, and here it was happening to me. I tried to keep my cool, but in my head, I was screaming, “*Momma! Unc! I made it!*” With a practiced confidence, I introduced myself to the gentleman, and he took my hockey travel bag – easily weighing north of 80 pounds – and led me outside.

He opened the door to a beautiful black limousine, put my bag inside, and extended his arm for me to enter. He closed my door, and that was when I allowed myself to gawk. Neon lights glowed, lining the ceiling and the bar, where a bottle of champagne sat on ice. I rubbed my hands on the soft ostrich seats and took in the smell of freshly cleaned carpets and well-oiled leather. The tinting on the windows was so dark that no one could see in. I felt like a star, a celebrity. So this was how the other half lived.

I wasn't certain where we were going or whom I would be meeting, but I was excited and 100% certain the outcome would be in my favor. The champagne was tempting, but I needed a clear head. I left it where it was in the ice and watched a droplet of condensation sluice slowly over the curve of the bottle and down its side.

The limo driver brought me to a newly built football stadium, crowded with traffic from other players and staff arriving for the start of camp and a new football season. I walked in awe through the state-of-the-art facility. Everything was new and modern and clean. As I followed the signs and arrows, I greeted everyone I passed until I arrived at the locker room. Watching the veteran players interacting brought a flood of nostalgia, and I smiled. I located my locker. Fastened to the front was a beautiful new nameplate with my name, and inside hung my new jersey and other equipment. Briefly, I remembered how unceremoniously Ball State had removed my nameplate and thrown my belongings into a black trash bag. I wanted to keep this feeling forever. I was ready to make my presence known in Winnipeg.

The first day was full of meetings—introduction of the front office, coaching, and administration staff, followed by special teams meetings to orient the newcomers about the differences between American and Canadian football. The coaches then stressed how

important it was to get on the special team's depth chart in order to make the roster. Then we broke into position meetings, which began with introductions followed by passing out the playbooks. I was brought in to play both the inside and outside linebacker position, but I hoped to get more time on the outside because it had more responsibilities in the passing game. I had specific goals: I wanted to finish the season with more than 15 takeaways on the stat sheet, at least 6 of those being interceptions.

The first team dinner began, and with it the inevitable rookie hazing. In the midst of eating chicken breasts, steaks, and a plethora of sides and sweets, the veteran players forced some of the rookies to stand and tell jokes, sing a song, or any number of silly performances. Some rookies got upset about the hazing saying they were making fools of themselves but I didn't mind, it was the norm in any locker room. One day, it would be me hazing the newcomers. I was getting some good ideas.

After dinner, I was shown to my new home. The stadium was near a college campus, and the entire team would be staying in the dorms, walking distance away. My apartment-style dorm held 2 bedrooms and a common living area, which I would share with another American defensive player. I dropped my things off and joined some of my new brothers in the game room to watch LeBron and the Heat in the NBA Finals, then hurried back to my room to study the materials I'd gotten. I read for a while, then closed the book and lay back on my pillow. I was thrilled. I was going to kill it on the field, and the NFL was going to be knocking at my door.

The alarm sounded at 6:10 a.m. First, I hit my knees and prayed, thanking God for bringing me this far. I washed up and then stood in front of the mirror. *You belong here! They've never seen anything as great as you! Play fast, hit hard, be smart*, I told myself. I dressed, ate breakfast in the cafeteria, and walked to the stadium. I still had time before the 8:00 a.m. meeting so I performed my other morning ritual: I read my Bible, Facetimed and texted with my family, looked over my playbook, and watched some film. After the meetings, the athletic trainers stretched me and practice began.

The practices were highly competitive. Everyone wanted to shine. We worked hard for 12 hours a day while our every move was evaluated—our knowledge of the playbook, our on-field performance, even how we interacted with the other players and staff off the field. I had 3 weeks to set myself apart—I was competing not only against the other linebackers but for one of the limited roster spots allotted only for imported players. I asked to be on every special team, and in pre-practice I went with the long snappers to work on both long and short snaps for the punt and field goal units. I wanted to demonstrate my flexibility, to show how valuable to the team since I could play multiple positions and play them well.

I didn't stop with regular practice. I did extra conditioning every day after practice, lifted three days a week, and watched practice film religiously, either alone or with my linebacker coach who was also the defensive coordinator. My goal was not only to get better but also to show my work ethic and leadership capabilities, even as a rookie.

Three weeks later, the Winnipeg Blue Bombers donned their helmets on IG Field for the first game of the preseason. My heart pounded as I saw the tens of thousands of fans in the bleachers. I had waited my whole life for this exact moment, and I was beyond ready for the opportunity to show the organization and the fans that they'd found a great player. I hoped they were ready for a show.

I started on kickoff, punt, and punt return. On the first play of the game I defeated a block, ran downfield and hit the returner as hard as I could. He hit the ground with an *Oof!* One play, one tackle. I was about to fill up the stat sheet. The game ended with multiple highlights for me. On one punt return, after blocking a man for nearly 10 seconds, my returner was trying to break a big run and I made another huge block in open field, which allowed him to gain an extra 30 yards. The entire stadium was on their feet, screaming and stomping and clapping. I was addicted to that sound. I played special teams at first, and in the second half went in for the defense, where I really found my groove. I was playing fast and was all over the field.

We lost the game, but I had so much fun playing. I believed I had a solid game and when I entered the locker room, many of the veterans came to me to tell me I played a great game and that they were sure I'd make the team. Their faith in me thrilled me particularly, since they'd been there long enough to know who was good enough to make the roster and who wasn't. On the stat sheets, I saw that I'd led the team with 8 tackles, 2 of which were tackles for loss; I also had a fumble recovery that I picked up within the 10-yard line, which was our team's only turnover and set us up for a late touchdown. I was extremely proud.

The first thing I did was call my mother to tell her about the game and how well I'd done. She just laughed. "Wendell, don't you think I already knew that? We watched it online."

Soon things would become even more surreal. At the end of every practice, after the head coach spoke, he would call out the names of players who the media wanted to speak with. The day after that first game, my name was called. I felt my heart in my throat. It would be my first interview as a CFL player—but it would not be the last. It wasn't just one reporter but several who held their mics out for me. They asked about my performance in the last game and about the upcoming game. One reporter in particular commented on how excited he was to meet me, and that he would be writing a full article on me. He asked how I got noticed by the GM, how it felt to play in Canada, and many other questions. The next day, the newspaper sent a photographer to shoot pictures of me during drills and team periods. I was going to be featured in a write-up—I was thrilled and grateful, and after the interview I took a moment to thank God for His continued blessings. I knew this piece was just a glimpse of the future, and it felt so good to be finally living the blessings I'd asked for.

People were starting to really take notice of me, but they still didn't fully comprehend what was to come. I was about to put the whole country on notice. In the first game, I didn't get as much playing time as I'd hoped, and I prayed that my performance and the media recognition that followed would prompt the coaches to reward me with more minutes on the field.

The Blue Bombers traveled to Hamilton, Ontario for our second and final preseason game. Just like any other business trip, I dressed sharply in a suit. The players who had already solidified their roster spots didn't make the trip; only those who still needed to be evaluated by the coaches or needed more reps to improve boarded the plane. We were all still fighting for a spot. After the warmup, I was standing on the sideline drinking water when the defensive coordinator approached me. He went over some game management details and said I would start at middle linebacker. Then he said, "Go out for the coin toss. You're the defensive captain."

I was ecstatic. The team was still full of veteran players dressed to play, and here I was a rookie being honored with the title of captain. I'd worked so hard and it was already paying off. Walking to midfield with the other team captains for the coin toss was a beautiful feeling. We won the toss and elected to kick off, meaning our defense – including me – would take the field first. As the American and Canadian national anthems played, I was so overwhelmed with pride and emotion that tears streamed uncontrollably down my face. I was ready to play.

On the opening kickoff I ran down the field and demolished a blocker, before helping one of my teammates tackle the returner. And I didn't stop there. Once again I led the team with 10 tackles, and I had 3 pass breakups, one of which should have been an interception. I also forced a fumble on a punt. I was in on the only 2 turnovers the team had in the entire preseason, proving that I was always around the football.

It was a good game, but there was a problem. During the 3rd quarter, I felt some pain in my foot. My work ethic and drive would not allow me to stop, and I played through the pain. Afterwards, I had it examined by the team doctor, who said they would look at it more closely once we got back to Winnipeg. On the plane ride back the pain was so intense I had to leave my shoe off. In Winnipeg, the doctor re-examined my foot, pressing and massaging it. The pain was excruciating. He diagnosed me with plantar fasciitis, an inflammation of the tissue that connects the heel bone to the toes. I had never heard of plantar fasciitis but I knew that I was in a lot of pain. The doctor said the injury would take 3-6 weeks to heal. I was devastated. After the treatment I watched the game film and went back to my dorm room in a funk. Three to six weeks? I couldn't be down that long. I vowed to accept every treatment they offered, to push the recovery closer to the three-week mark than the six.

The next morning, my alarm woke me at 6:10 and I began my morning routine. As I was leaving the dorm to get breakfast, I saw the assistant GM. "The GM wants to meet with you," he said. "Bring your playbook."

I maintained my composure, but I was frantic inside. It was the day of final cuts, when the staff would determine who would earn a spot on the roster. I took a deep breath and entered the area the GM was now using as his office.

The first thing he did was shake my hand and tell me I was a great player and they loved having me there. Then his expression changed. "We wanted to keep you, Wendell, but there are a limited number of American roster spots. It's just not in the team's best interest to keep an American who can't play for several weeks. I'm sorry."

And then, for the second time in my playing career, all of my belongings were put into a black trash bag. But it was different this time—I was terribly disappointed, but I knew they had no choice. They treated me with respect. The GM then promised to pay for my rehab, also adding that as soon as I could run without restrictions or pain they would bring me back to Winnipeg. It was a gratifying consolation, but it didn't change the fact that I'd just lost my job. The limo ride back to the airport – with the four other players who also weren't selected – was not nearly as exciting as the ride in.

I started rehab right away. I went 5 days a week, sometimes twice a day. The physical therapist and I both kept in constant communication with personnel from Winnipeg to report my progress, and after 4 weeks I was cleared to play. Not one to take chances, the head scout for the Blue Bombers flew to Detroit to watch me in a private workout. The

workout took less than 30 minutes. I warmed up, did a few sprints, and the scout stopped me. He'd seen all he needed to see. "Be looking for an email with your flight information," he said, and shook my hand and left. I was bursting, ready to get back to ballin'.

And then, another blow. A few days after the private workout with the head scout, my agent called. The Blue Bombers' entire staff, along with the GM, had been fired. I couldn't believe it—another opportunity gone, vanished. What was more, we were already a month into the season, and most teams had already secured every roster spot, especially for imported players. I didn't know what to do.

I needed to clear my head, so I knelt beside my bed and asked God for guidance, then took my cleats and went out to the field. The blood rushed through my body and my heart pounded with the effort, and I thought about my next step. *You gon' box, or you gon' boogaloo?* I heard my uncle say. I'd had a huge setback, but I wasn't going to quit or lie down. I just needed a plan.

I thought about my goal of playing in the NFL, and how the CFL was always just a step to reaching that ultimate goal. I knew I'd been productive in those games. Maybe, I thought, I had just enough film to get my shot at the League. I knew I belonged on an NFL roster, but I wondered if there was enough proof on tape to get me in. I emailed the team's video coordinator and asked for the recordings. I would make a highlight film and get it to every team in the NFL. Someone would sign me, and that was that.

Things were looking up in my personal life. After a rocky start, my son's mother and I decided to make our relationship work. We moved in together and I fixed my work schedule so I could spend more time with them, taking my son to and from school, and being an intricate part of his life as I'd always wanted. The best part of my days were when we were together. I would help him with homework, chaperon his field trips, take pizza and soda to his class twice a month, take him to football and baseball practice and games, and cook dinner for my family. I loved being a father and head of the household. I valued and took pride in everything I did at home.

Of course, I had to make a paycheck. I worked for a private security company, where I could again make my own schedule. Flexibility was a priority to me while I pursued my NFL dreams—I couldn't pass up an opportunity for a workout or practice because I had to work. I had to keep my eyes on the prize. I stayed home during the week to take care of my family and worked 12- to 16-hour workdays on Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays. It worked out great. No one else wanted to work weekends, but I welcomed it. That way I could train hard and undisturbed while Wendell Jr. was at school, spend quality time with my family, and still get paid for a full workweek by working double shifts all weekend. It was the year 2014, and I was preparing for the biggest year of my life.

I created my CFL highlight tape and restarted the contacting teams and scouts process. I had legit professional football film with my CFL playing experience and I went to the Detroit Lions practice facility multiple times thinking I could easily get an opportunity from them now. I sat in the lobby many days hoping for a meeting with anyone who was willing to watch me workout, watch my film, or simply talk to me about how to go about getting an opportunity to play, but each time security would be called and I would be forced to exit the building. Playing for my hometown team, my favorite team, would have been a dream come true, I just had to figure out how to not get thrown out the building like Jazz on *The Fresh Prince* whenever I walked in.

I began to research and contact NFL agents, and after a few successful correspondences, I set up some meetings with a few. I was eager to get in front of them face-to-face. I knew I could pass any eye test and once an agent met me personally, they would be just as excited as I was. And I also knew that my professional and athletic résumés, along with hard copies of my college transcripts and three years of professional film, would help me land a new agent with NFL experience. Of all the agents I met with, I chose to sign with the one who said he already had multiple players on active NFL rosters and could get me landed on a team as a free agent almost immediately and started to pay for my training with one of the nation's top trainers. I was thrilled. I was now legitimately training for the NFL—the NFL! Landing a contract with a team was finally within arm's reach.

I trained with about 30 other guys, 5 who were represented by my new agent and the other 25 being pro athletes from the NFL, MLB, and NHL. I loved the diversity—it was something new. We all had common goals and we were all very serious about them, and relationships formed and grew, along with our strength, speed, and athleticism. Occasionally, when Wendell Jr. didn't have school, I brought him with me to the facility. He loved it; they loved it. Coincidentally, a reality TV show was being recorded at the facility called *American Muscle*, which followed the training lives of pro athletes—how we trained, what we ate, how we spent our free time. We all had a great time with it. They filmed us most of the day and it brought us even closer and made us work even harder.

My fellow athletes believed in my NFL dreams almost as much as I did. They knew I would be picked up soon; some inquired about where I would play and what feedback I was getting from my agent. I had several events coming up. One was a Pro Day, where draft-eligible players at each university worked out for NFL scouts. I trained hard for Pro Day. It was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, since I'd missed it in college. I was going to make the most of it. Even more exciting was that Pro Day was held at one of the most prestigious and wealthy universities in America; one with an extensive history of winning and of sending hordes of athletes to the next level. One of the only universities to have a player drafted to the NFL every single year.

Pro Day arrived, and I was excited and ready. Scouts from every NFL team would be there. I was prepared to participate in every event – cognitive ability, problem-solving aptitude, coaches' interview – but I was told to wait, because they were prioritizing the young men fresh out of college. Finally, it was my turn. They took my measurements, and then asked only two things of me. One was to run the 40, which I did in 4.63 seconds—not bad for my position, but not good for me. It was nowhere near my fastest time. The second was to participate in the individual position drills. I always excelled in this area of the workout, and despite the relatively slow 40, I thought I'd done well enough for a closer look. Always proactive, I did a lot of networking and stored the contact information of some scouts and coaches who were present. I had an agent, but I didn't expect someone to work harder for my dreams than I did. I left the University of Michigan that day feeling pretty good about my chances of being invited to a private workout or even a camp with an NFL team. I waited for that call—and I *stayed* ready so I wouldn't have to *get* ready.

I kept up correspondence with the scouts and coaches on a weekly basis, sending them film through email and calling those whom I'd built a relationship with. I spoke with my agent almost every day and he assured me that opportunities were coming my way. It had been a huge year, and I'd gotten a lot accomplished. But I had yet to wear that shield.

I kept training. I got many offers to play for arena and CFL teams, but my agent said he had been speaking with multiple teams about bringing me in for camp or the least private workouts and all I needed to do was continue working hard and to stay patient because in the upcoming weeks, I would be in The League.

I waited for my call. I was still eager and excited as I waited to sign an NFL contract. I had still been in contact with teams directly and so had my agent but the weeks I had been told to wait turned into months and as the months came and went, so did the NFL season. I was still an NFL free agent, unsigned, and for a second time, the NFL didn't call.

Though the NFL regular season had ended, football was still being played in other leagues, and as I wrapped my head around not joining an NFL team, in early 2015 an opportunity from an unexpected place presented itself. Football in Austria. I loved to travel, and the opportunity to spend time in Europe was one I couldn't pass up. My international flight from Detroit made a quick stop in Munich, Germany, then off to Innsbruck, Austria.

My flight landed just before 10a.m. and the head coach picked me up from the airport. He greeted me warmly and we began our drive to the football offices. As excited as I was about playing football, I had to stop a moment and admire everything around me as we drove. The European architecture was breathtaking, far more intricate and striking than could be conveyed on a 2-dimensional television screen. The frost-tipped mountains provided a resplendent backdrop that was beyond anything I'd ever seen in the United States. It was my first time on another continent, and I was excited not only for the opportunity to play football but also to drink in more of this exquisite scenery.

We arrived at the football offices and I met the staff. The defensive coordinator gave me a playbook, and we dove right in, learning the base defense and watching some film. After that, he took me to get my new country ID card, a cell phone, and an access card to a 24-hour gym. Afterwards he took me to my new temporary home. It was an actual penthouse suite at a hotel, with an amazing view of the city. Everything was posh and gorgeous. I could get used to it.

Practice was supposed to be in the evening, but a few hours later my new cell phone rang, and the heavily accented voice of one of the coaches told me he was picking me up early and to get ready. I didn't have to be told twice. I couldn't wait to get on the field. Once at the practice facility I received my equipment and dressed out. The weather there was colder than I was accustomed to playing in, but I was excited and ready to have fun.

The team I signed on with, I learned, also had a youth and a high school team, and I signed up to be an assistant coach on both teams. I loved it. I never lost the drive to make a positive impact on the lives of young people, regardless of their nationality. Coaching youth sports almost always leads to personal mentorship and helping young people grow was something I believed in fervently.

I met so many good people in Austria. I traveled all over, both to play in our games and to coach the young guys. I visited France, Czech Republic, the Netherlands, Italy, Germany, and many other European countries, especially those surrounding Austria. Every place had its own personality—different culture, food, customs, ways of dress. It was all new, and I soaked up the opportunity to learn as much as I could while both playing and coaching the game I loved. I loved this exciting new place, but I never forgot that I had a job to do.

The league I was playing in had rules that differed for foreign players on the team.

In some games, all players could take the field; in others, only one import was allowed to play. I only played in six games—one of which was my very first snow game. As a kid I'd played tackle football in the snow every winter with friends but to play an actual game in the snow in another country made it an unforgettable day.

The season was extremely productive, and scouts for many of the other team's we played approached me trying to recruit me to come play for their teams and in their countries. Multiple media articles, both on the team website and in the country's newspapers, featured me and my accomplishments in games. One article had an interesting focus—my pregame attire, since I always wore a suit on game days, and it was the first time any player on the team had done so. The organization and the fans took notice. A pleasant and unexpected outcome from that article was that an Austrian designer fitted me for a custom Austrian suit, followed by a photo shoot to show off my new duds. I loved it.

But, like the old saying goes, "Time flies when you're having fun." My time to depart swiftly approached. I lamented leaving Europe and the people and gorgeous scenery and delicious food. But I had a big reason to get back—I missed my son terribly. He hadn't been able to visit me in Europe, and I needed to get home to him ASAP.

Wendell Jr. was entering his first summer of contact football. He'd played flag for 2 years, baseball for 3, and basketball for 1. After years of wearing shoulder pads and a helmet as a 'costume', it was finally time for him to have a pair of his own. I honestly don't know who was more excited, he or I. He was taller than most the kids his age so his youth coaches played him at defensive end, linebacker, and tight end. We were both ready for a fun summer of friends and football.

Many of the other kids had been playing contact ball for 2 years already, but Wendell Jr. was developing well and learning to play at the new, fast, and physical pace. His first scrimmage was coming up and we were both excited. However, I would have to miss it—my cousin was getting married, and his bachelor party was that weekend. I knew Wendell Jr. would have upcoming games, but my cousin – with any luck – would only get married once. I hopped the plane and landed in Nevada, ready to celebrate. My family, always there for me, kept me abreast of Wendell Jr.'s performance, sending videos and Facetiming to show me the action live. While I was winning money in the casino, I was watching my son win his first game, playing great on both sides of the field. It seemed unreal. And I was here for it.

There is a saying, "What happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas." But something happened while I was in Vegas that I carry with me wherever I go. On the morning of August 2nd, 2015, at 9:23 a.m., my phone rang. A woman's voice cried hysterically on the other end, so frenzied that I could not recognize it. I looked at the Caller ID: it was my cousin. I kept trying to calm her down so that I could understand what she was saying. And then she uttered three words that would change me forever: "Uncle Raymond, dead!"

A shot of adrenaline burst through me. How could this be? The sun shone through the curtain in my hotel suite but the room was dark through my tear-filled eyes. My uncle, the strongest man on the planet, my Superman, gone? I couldn't, wouldn't believe it. I didn't want her to hear me cry so I continued to try to calm her down and keep the sadness and shock from my voice. After several minutes, I hung up. I needed to confirm this news—it just couldn't be real. She must have been mistaken.

I called my uncle's son, who confirmed the horrible news. He had woken up and

started getting ready for church when he noticed my uncle was abnormally still. He tried to stir him, but Raymond was unresponsive. His spirit had departed his body. The rest of the family had arrived at his house by then, and I asked how everyone was. I needed to speak to my mother—she had just lost her brother and best friend. My mother came on the line and she sounded strong. I'd always been proud of my mother, and I knew that although my uncle's death was killing her inside, she felt like she had to be strong for everyone else. I asked about my grandmother, and she said she was okay. But I knew she wasn't. This event would devastate her.

The rest of the Vegas trip passed in a blur. I was crushed, and the more I tried to fight the tears the more insistent they became. My family's world had flipped upside-down, changed forever. On an intellectual level, I know death is certain, but truth be told I never thought Superman would die. A community servant, lover and provider to all people, humanitarian. He was everything I aspired to be and more. He would no longer be with me physically, but I knew his presence would live on in me forever. Still taking care of me. I felt – and still feel – his spirit with me, everywhere I go. He speaks to me in my dreams and feeds me the strength I need to keep pushing.

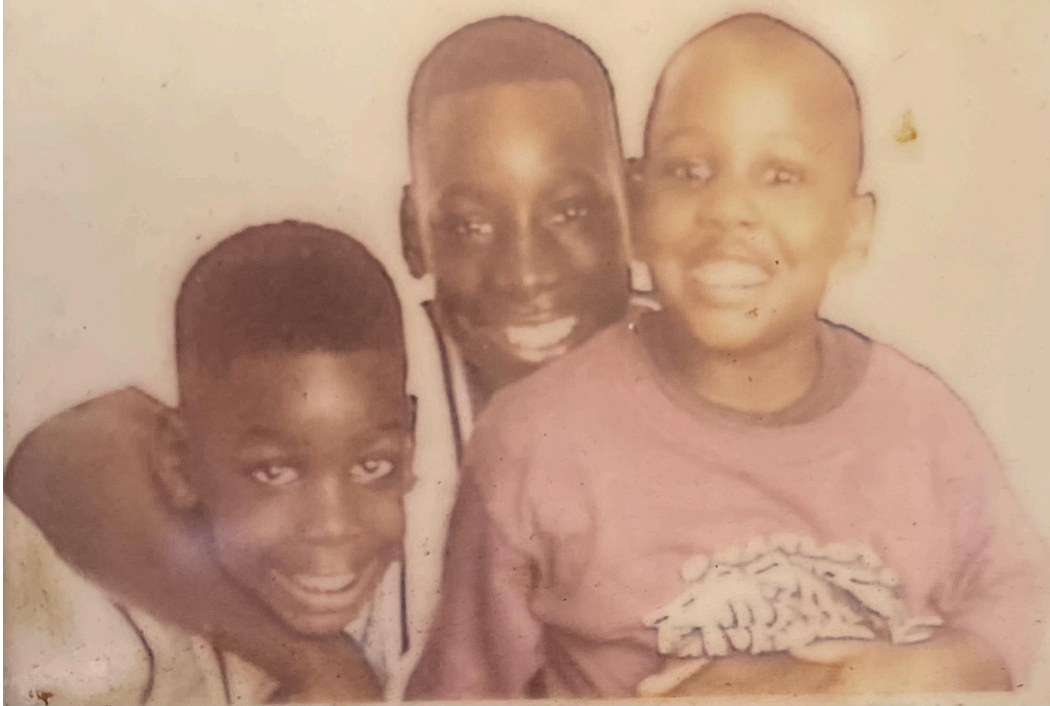
The family was now mine, to take care of and to lead. I had to do it right. The way Unc would have. I had to make something of myself and for myself, my family, my people—and for him. He had prepared me for this day, and I would make him proud. Make God proud. I vowed to approach each day like my family depended on me to survive. In a way, that's how it was with Raymond—we all had depended on him. Now it was my turn. And like Officer Smith had said, on my first day at MLK High School, I had some huge shoes to fill.



Young Wendell and mother Antoinette



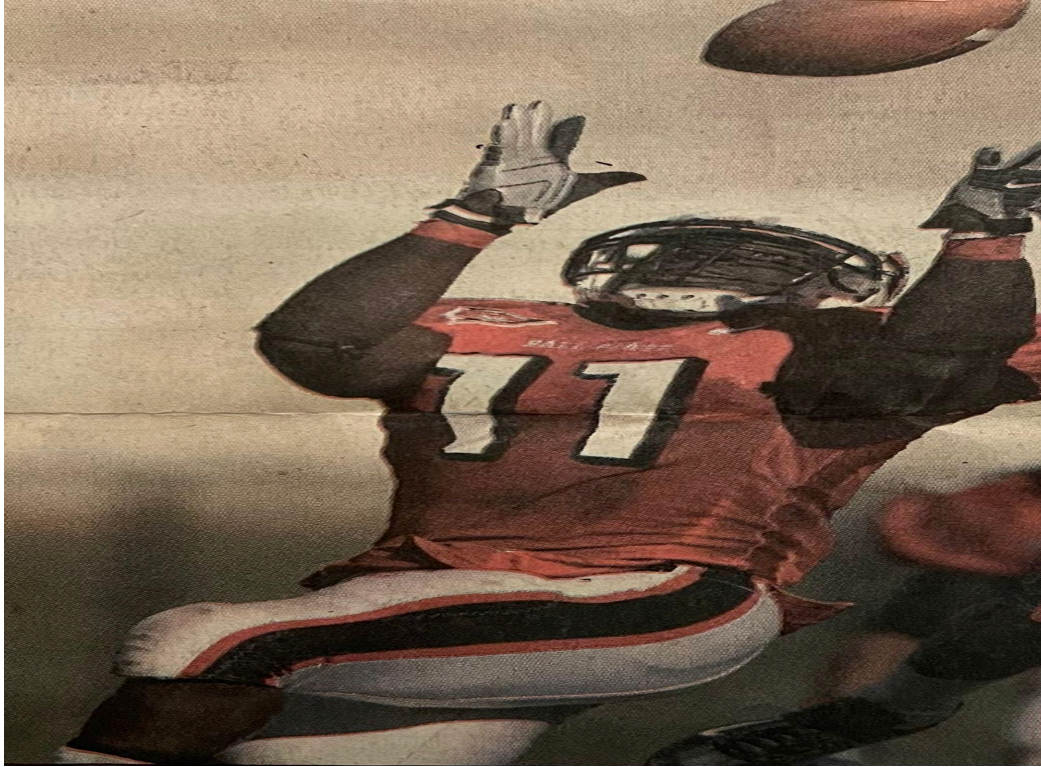
Wendell and Uncle Raymond at football banquet



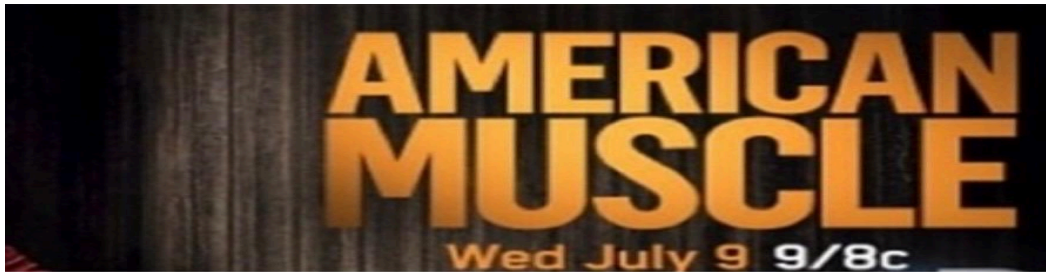
Wendell with brother and cousin



Wendell's maternal grandparents with 5 of their 6 children



Wendell catching an interception at Ball State University



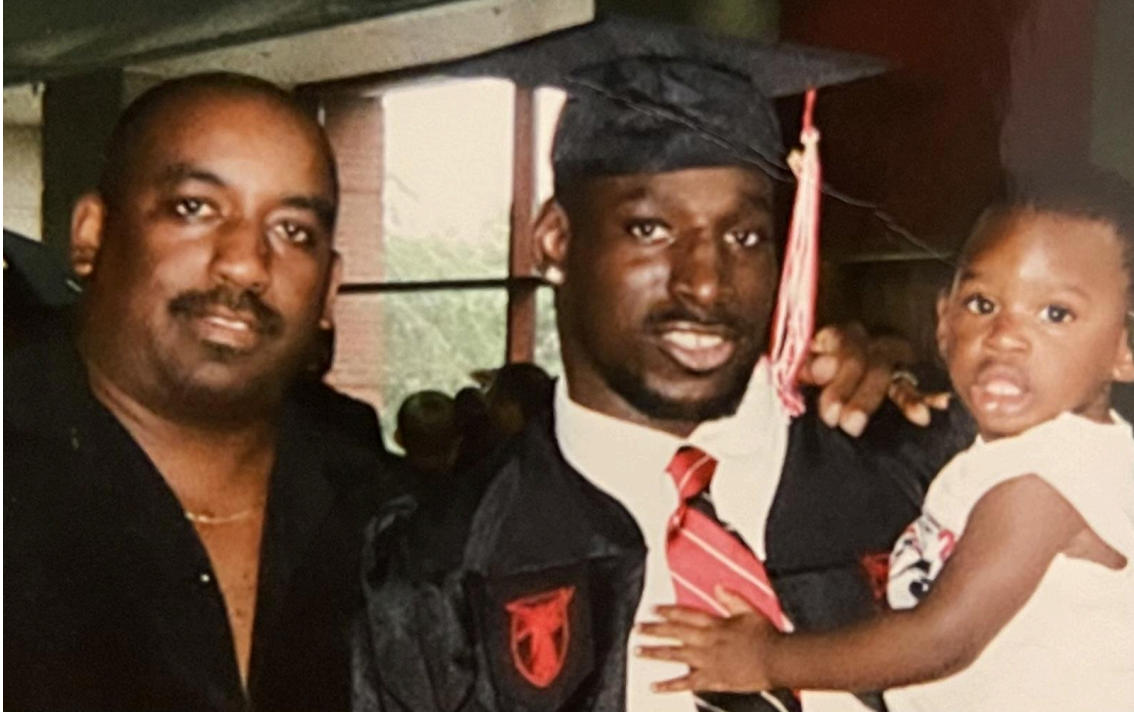
Wendell and other professional athletes take a break from training on the set of American Muscle



Wendell pregame in Canada



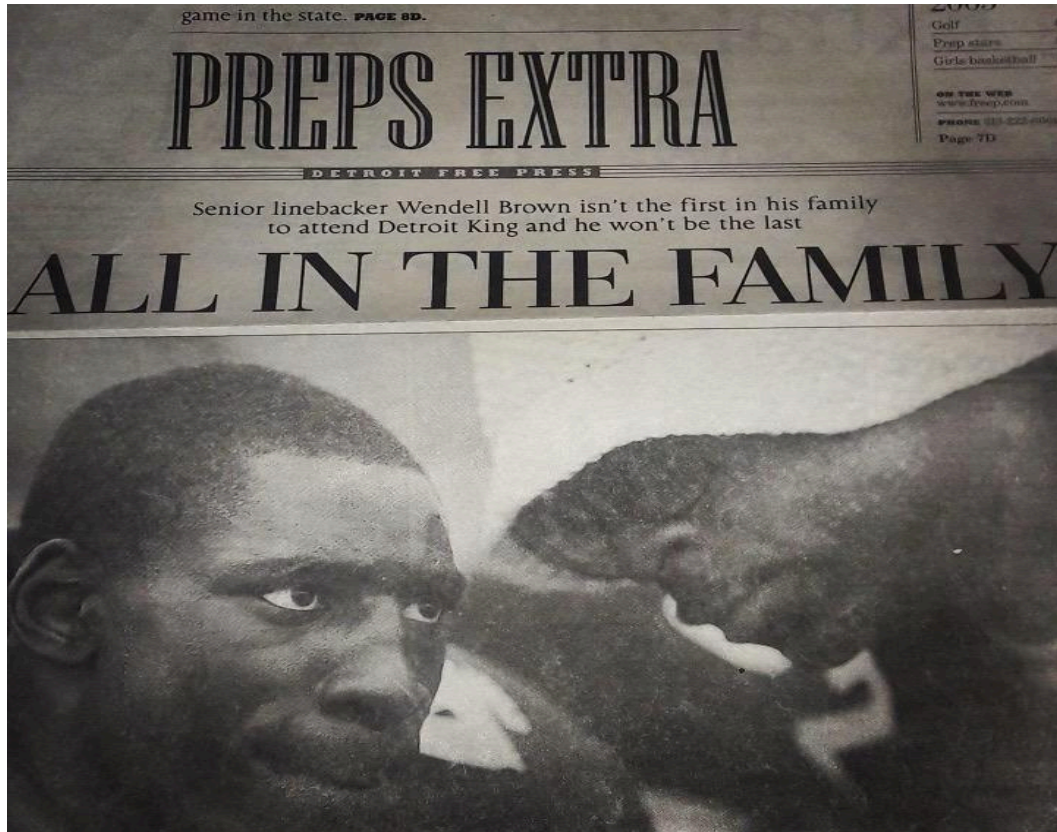
Wendell, mother and brother



3 Generations of Wendell's at Ball State University Graduation



Wendell, brother, and cousin participating in middle school sports



Wendell and Uncle Raymond featured in news article

Chapter Eight

MADE IN CHINA

*We will spread Love, Life, Truth, Knowledge,
Perseverance, Positivity, Peace, and All things Godly
to all we may encounter— physically, verbally, or just with eye contact.
-Wendell L. Brown Sr.*

My world changed drastically with the death of my uncle. He was a mentor, a father figure, a leader—and a friend. My life would never be the same. But if there was one thing he had taught me, it was that life had to go on. I had to take care of my family, and I had to pursue my dreams as fervently as I ever had.

Being exposed to world travel during my extensive trip to Europe showed me things I'd never known existed in my small world of Michigan and surrounding states. I'd spent some time in Canada, but life and culture on the other side of the pond was completely different, and it whetted my appetite for more. So when I received a call offering a job playing and coaching halfway around the world, I was thrilled at the prospect. The call came from Asia—China to be exact.

Still, never one for impulsivity especially after the birth of my son, I debated for days, mulling over all the questions. My uncle's death was new and the wound was raw, for me, for my mother, and for my grandparents. She needed me, and the rest of my family did too. And what about my son? Would he thrive with his father so far away? Would he resent my absence? Would his mother begrudge my not being around to help raise our son? I relayed my feelings to my family, and they all said the same thing: I should go to China and follow my dreams of playing the game I loved, the game we all loved. I treasured their support, but I still agonized with guilt. It wasn't until I spoke with Raymond's son that I was convinced about what path to take. "Go," he said. "My dad would have wanted you to go to China." My family was strong, largely because of Raymond's unfailing guidance. And they would continue to be strong, regardless of geography.

My decision was made, I forged ahead. I completed my travel visa paperwork through the Chinese embassy in Chicago. I read a few articles about everyday life in China to better acclimate myself to the new culture and customs. I had a long talk with my son and his mother, promising to keep in close touch through Facetime and text, and promised the same to my mother and the rest of my family.

Despite knowing how much I would miss everyone, I was excited about going to China for many reasons. One, I'd grown to love world travel and exposure to different cultures; two, I loved kung fu movies and wanted to learn some moves from a kung fu master; three, I loved Chinese food—particularly General Tso's chicken and shrimp fried rice; and four, almost everything in my home held the label *Made in China*, and I was curious to see the country that had provided most of the products I used in my daily life. The recent death of my beloved uncle had changed everything, but my life would be changed far more drastically upon my arrival on Asian soil.

I flew out of Detroit the morning of September 1, 2015. The skies were clear that

morning, and but for the curvature of the earth I could almost imagine I could see all the way to the new home that awaited me. We flew west over the Pacific Ocean, in the opposite direction I'd flown to go to Europe. The seemingly endless body of water looked much the same, but what waited for me on the other side of the blue expanse would prove to be quite different indeed. After 28 hours of eating, watching movies, and napping, the plane landed in Shanghai, on the eastern coast of China, around midnight, for a 2 hour layover before the hop to Chongqing.

I'd been to many airports in my life, but three things baffled me about the Shanghai airport. First was the sheer number of people there so late at night. People were everywhere—walking, standing, sitting, some even lying on the floor. The place was packed. Second, the volume of the conversations was much higher than I was used to. It seemed everyone was shouting at each other, even if they stood only a foot or two apart. The fact that I couldn't understand a word probably factored into that impression, I'm sure. The third thing was something that really shocked me: I was the only Black person in the entire airport. It was a huge culture shock. I assumed Black people were everywhere; and besides, Shanghai's coastal location made it an international hub—and weren't there Black people all over the world? Accustomed to America, where I blended in almost seamlessly, I felt strange and out of place. My discomfort grew as I walked through the airport. Knowing I'd be laid over for several hours, I went to find something to eat—a cup of noodles, a bag of chips, a Snickers bar, and a lemonade—and as I passed, I noticed people pointing and talking about me. Of course, I didn't understand what they said, but I wasn't sure if it was complimentary or not.

I shook it off and hoped this behavior wasn't indicative of what lay ahead of me in the country I would be calling my home for the next few months. A voice begins speaking over the loudspeaker and since no English translation follows, I approached one of the desks which had a group of customer service representatives standing at it conversing. I intended to inquire about my flight, to see if I was in the right area to board the correct flight and if it was running on time. To my great surprise, not one of the representatives spoke a word of English. It was my second culture shock—of all the different countries I'd been to, I'd never traveled where the locals didn't speak English, particularly in the tourist areas like airports and big-city restaurants. Then I thought to myself, *I'm in their country. They shouldn't be speaking my language; I should be speaking theirs.*

I managed to successfully board my connecting flight, and a few hours later I landed at my final destination in Chongqing. I gathered my luggage from the baggage claim and approached the area where people waited for their loved ones. It was then that I heard clapping and cheering from the crowd. I didn't know who it was for until I got closer—and noticed that the applauders were wearing orange and white football jerseys and hats. The cheering was for me.

I smiled broadly. "How did you know it was me?" I joked.

"You are the only Black person here!" one Chinese man responded.

I laughed, and the 3 men laughed with me. I chuckled to myself, imagining the conversation among them before my arrival: *How will we know him? Just look for the Black guy.* Relief washed over me when I heard them speaking to me in English. Their smiling faces, and their fluency in my native tongue, warmed my worried heart. They took my bags and handed me a team shirt and hat and led me outside. They asked about my flight, and

asked if I was hungry or thirsty, all the things that make a stranger feel welcomed. The company was particularly appreciated after the last 30 hours of being completely surrounded—and completely alone.

Like in Winnipeg, the ride that awaited me was glamorous—a white AMG Mercedes-Benz G-Class wagon with a posh red interior. It was gorgeous. I took a spot in the back seat where I gazed out the window as we drove. The city of Chongqing was beautiful. We drove over a bridge, and the colorful lights that adorned the bridge railing and surrounding buildings reflected off the rolling water of the Yangtze River beneath us and transported me back to Christmas in Detroit, surrounded by family and food and brightly wrapped presents. I looked up and saw two huge, all-gold towers. I'd never seen anything like them. I drank in the unfamiliar flora, architecture, and locals. It was all so different from back home. During the ride, the team representatives announced the plans for upcoming days—national parks, mountains, iconic buildings, authentic food, and more—and the pleasures of travel revealed themselves before me like a gift on Christmas morning. I knew I was going to have the time of my life.

The Benz pulled up to an enormous hotel and as I checked in, the desk clerk made a copy of my passport before giving me a room key. My room was a suite on the 23rd floor, which I would share with Martell, a Black man from Philly. After seeing no face like mine among the thousands in the last 30 hours, Martell's dark skin was a welcome sight. We also shared many similarities—he was American, of course, and had both college and pro football experience, like I did. It was also his first time in Asia; he'd arrived only two days earlier.

Martell and I talked for a while and then I excused myself. I connected to the hotel's Wi-Fi and opened the *Facetime* app. It was time to call home. I called my mother first and turned the camera around to show her the luxurious hotel suite and the magnificent view from my window. The hotel sat in the center of a shopping square packed with high-end restaurants and boutiques, and with the 12-hour time difference it was the perfect time to not only catch my mother awake but also show off the glittering evening lights of Chongqing. My mother was eager and excited to see everything, so I led her on a virtual tour of the kitchenette, living area, and bedroom, and into the bathroom. It was then that I noticed a sign taped on the bathroom mirror: *Warning! Do not drink or brush your teeth with water from the faucet!* I was taken aback. I'd never been in a place where I couldn't drink the water. My mother saw the note, too, and begged me to heed the warning. She didn't have to ask twice. I called the front desk every day to request multiple bottles of water be delivered to the suite for Martell and myself.

The team knew how to engender loyalty, and they filled the first several days with nothing but fun—traveling, sightseeing, shopping, eating, and partying. And no football. Although I loved the game and was eager to see how it was played halfway across the world, I was happy without it for a few days. I was having a blast.

One night, Martell and I, along with 12 Chinese men and 3 Chinese women, were taken to a restaurant that showed me just how different *authentic* Chinese dining was, compared to 'Chinese' dining in the States. First, the building. It was huge, and it looked like a Chinese temple from a movie, covered in red tiles with pointed tips at the tops and sides. Plants and flowers lined the path leading to the door, and a pond full of colorful fish surrounded the building itself. But that was just the beginning. Walking inside the

restaurant was almost like walking into a museum—statues, vases, sculptures; and paintings of samurai, animals, and agriculture. It was stunning. The hostess led us to a private dining area that held a huge table with a large revolving disk in the center. I'd never seen a table so big. We took our seats as the hostess brought plates, saucers, and chopsticks. Then one of my team hosts asked what I wanted to eat so he could order for me. I already knew: sweet-and-sour chicken, shrimp fried rice, and a salad. My mouth watered at the thought.

The waitress arrived, carrying an arm-length vase full of liquor, from which she poured everyone – including herself – a shot. Someone spoke some words in Chinese, everyone toasted and threw back the shots, and then the waitress took our order. Shortly afterward, the waitress brought out the appetizer—a huge bowl full of some type of winged insects. I was offered some; I respectfully declined. I'd never eaten an insect in my life, and now didn't seem like the right time to start. But that wasn't the last of the culinary surprises.

The servers brought dozens of bowls and plates heaped full of food. It was then that I understood the revolving tabletop, as everyone picked up their chopsticks and took what they wanted from the bowls in the center as it rotated. I waited politely, looking for my chicken. What I saw instead were vegetables, raw pig snouts and feet, rabbit, turtle, duck intestine, fish, brains, cubed blood—yes, *cubed blood*—and much more. I felt like Coach Klein at Bobby Boucher's house in *The Waterboy*.

As the table continued to spin, I realized I had seen everything except what I was looking for. "Where is the chicken?" I smiled. Someone pointed to a bowl. I saw no legs, thighs, breasts, or wings inside the bowl—only bones and chicken feet. I hesitated. This certainly wasn't KFC. But I didn't want to be rude to my hosts, so I picked up my chopsticks and tried to remove some of the chicken...parts. I was unsuccessful. I heard a few snickers as I was forced to ask for a fork. The waitress smiled sweetly and left to get it, and as I waited I watched the others and realized I'd been using chopsticks incorrectly my entire life. They wielded them like experts—and I guess they were.

I also couldn't believe what was being served and greedily devoured by everyone around me. Nothing looked even remotely familiar or appetizing. There was no General Tso's chicken, no pepper steak, no shrimp fried rice, no egg rolls—none of the things I'd come to love when I ate out for Chinese in the States. Briefly, I wondered if there was a McDonald's or a Subway nearby, but I dismissed the thought and gave into peer pressure of eating what was in front of me. As I washed down some unidentified animal flesh with another swig of baijiu, it occurred to me that the T-shirts, picture frames, and water bottles back home bore labels that, while technically true, were misrepresentative of reality. For what lay in front of me was far different from those Americanized products—what lay in front of me was genuinely and authentically *Made in China*.

The next few days were hell. I lay in bed with a terrible stomachache, a pain like I'd never felt before. It felt like my stomach was mercilessly being ripped open. I couldn't eat or drink—I could hardly even get out of bed. Between bouts of vomiting, writhing, sweating, and moaning, I prayed to God to get me through this pain and to expel whatever crazy thing I'd allowed the Chinese guys to talk me into eating. Finally, on the morning of the fourth day, I woke up free of pain but tired and dehydrated. I drank water slowly – bottled, of course – still somewhat afraid to ingest anything. But it stayed down, and I thanked God for seeing me through.

My hosts and the hotel concierges helped me find places to buy food I could handle,

and not long afterwards the festivities resumed. We traveled some more, partied some more, and ate some more – my hosts were careful to find places with ‘normal’ food – and soon it would be time for our first football practice. I was excited to get on the field, but before I could make our debut, Martell and myself had to speak to the team representatives about contracts. I quickly found out that I had been flown to China not by a team or organization but by a person who started a football team and wanted to quickly make his team competitive in the new Chinese American Football League. A Chinese man who had given himself the name Ben was my host and when I asked about having a contract drawn up to sign I was told that we didn’t need one. I had been invited to China on a travel visa, and making money or a travel visa not a work visa would be forbidden and could lead to legal trouble for me and whoever was paying me. “You don’t have to worry. You are my guest. I will take care of everything” the short, round Chinese man said, smiling. I smiled too but I was thinking about making enough money to not only enjoy myself in the country but also send some home to my son. I was thinking about insurance in case I got hurt. I was thinking about a ton of things but after being assured that I was in the hands of an upright and trustworthy man, I left the meeting with my monthly stipend of 24,000RMB, and without signing a contract.

Days later a car picked Martell and myself up from our hotel and drove us to one of the local university’s soccer fields. The fields were full of people, young and old, walking around the track or on the turf playing soccer, but standing to the side was a group of men in shoulder pads. When they saw us, they clapped and cheered with enthusiasm. Again, I felt grateful for the hospitality of my foreign hosts. Our translator introduced us and I looked around at my new team. I can’t say exactly what I expected, but this wasn’t it. The players ranged in age from about 18 to 45, and none of them looked very athletic. Of the 40 people present, only 6 spoke English, including Martell and me. But I remained positive. I’d come here to play football, and that was what I was going to do.

The coach spoke a few words and then several of the players looked at me. In English, he told me I’d be playing running back. I laughed. I’d played fullback in high school and had played in some packages in college, but I hadn’t been a true running back since I was 13 years old. I knew I could play any position and play it well, so I prepared for my role as offensive playmaker.

Practice began and I observed the athleticism of the other players on my team. Like any other football practice, the receivers began by running routes on air, and I wanted to be stunned by their lack of ability, but I wasn’t. It seemed like they were moving in slow motion; what was more, no one could catch the ball. The linemen tended just to lean on one another. It was almost comical. *Are they just rusty?* I wondered, hoping it was true, because we looked terrible. And then I had another hope—that maybe all the other teams in the league were just as bad as we were. I looked around and mentally counted the good players on the team. It was like the card game spades, I realized: I had 4 and a possible.

We came together for full-team drills. The first formation consisted of 1 receiver, 2 wings, and 2 backs, in a pro split set just 3 yards from the quarterback. On the very first play, an illegal formation, and it was no mistake—it was indeed their base formation. I couldn’t help but wonder, *How can they be lining up this way every play all season and not be penalized? Who is officiating these games and allowing this to happen?* It was bizarre. When the ball snapped it only got worse. The players didn’t know how to run block, how to pass rush,

how to drop in coverage, they didn't know how to accomplish the most basic act: throwing and catching the football. I realized quickly the daunting truth: on a team full of football players, no one had any idea how to play football.

I knew that in order to win a game – or even score a single point – the team needed to be taught everything, starting with the basics. I watched for an hour and then joined the huddle—which was conducted entirely in Chinese. A player standing behind the huddle interpreted: the QB would toss the ball to me on the right. Like many things since I left Detroit for China, the situation felt hypnagogic, and I wasn't sure what to expect after the ball was snapped. But I nodded, and the quarterback shouted a loud word I assumed to be “*Break!*”

The huddle broke. Historically, the team would be in a split back set, but I moved back to 6 yards inside of 3 and directly behind the quarterback and got in my stance. On the snap, the QB tossed me the ball and I ran as fast as I could toward the sideline to avoid the defense. I wondered how so many players were in the backfield so fast until I noticed the entire offensive line had turned around and began to watch me run the ball, not blocking or even touching a soul. I hit the corner and ran past the defense, toward the endzone. It always felt good to touch the endzone especially as a defensive player but it had been over a decade since someone had voluntarily handed me the football. I could get used to this. I turned around and headed back towards the team, and everyone – even those who were supposed to tackle me – started cheering. I realized they believed I was the one who would save the team from humiliation, but I knew that a *team* needed more than one player who knew what to do with the ball. The team already had a coach, but I had to step in and coach not only the players but also *the coach himself*; otherwise we would literally be the worst team to ever touch the field. I had my work cut out for me.

We trained for three more weeks, working on speed, agility, hands, footwork, blocking, tackling, throwing and catching the football but there was not enough time in the world to learn everything needed before game day arrived. We would be playing a team traveling from Shanghai China at 6 p.m and we gathered at 4:00 to warm up and stretch. I felt a profound responsibility to ensure that all the Chinese players were in the correct positions and had retained an understanding of what they were supposed to do during the game. That onus was even more pronounced than my desire to make my own plays. I was no demigod, but at that moment I felt like Atlas, carrying the entire weight of the team's success on my shoulders.

I started the game at running back and outside linebacker, deferring to one of the team veterans who wanted to play middle linebacker and everything started slowly for us, but we did manage to get some positive gains offensively. The Shanghai team seemed significantly more prepared than we were. They had real formations, real plays, and real players who could actually catch the ball. They also employed many non-Chinese people, whom I assumed were teaching the locals how to play the game. Chongqing lies 1,000 miles inland, but Shanghai, being a coastal, international city, was more friendly to Western culture, so it was no surprise they were better than we were. I made some huge runs and even scored twice. Defensively, I made several tackles and home some good hits, but one of those I wished I hadn't made. I hit a Shanghai player so hard I nearly ripped his ear completely off—he needed 16 stitches to keep it attached to the side of his head. I felt terrible, knowing I'd hurt someone, and knowing that person should never been on the

same field as I was. They were amateurs, and as such, vulnerable to injury amid a seasoned vet.

Despite my performance and that of the other American players, our team was getting killed defensively. It made me angry—the Shanghai team had foreign players at almost every position and foreign coaches on the sideline, and we were the Bad News Bears. Even more irritating was that Shanghai had cheerleaders. Where were our cheerleaders?

Our Chinese coach substituted players during the game who'd never played the position they were allowed to play during the game—another amateur move. I decided I had to step in. I moved our players around like pieces on a chess board, strategically moving myself to the safety position unless our opponent put in a good foreign player at receiver, at which point I got in position to cover him. On offense, I switched between running back, receiver, and QB, because we needed some points. I wore a lot of hats, but the other American players did as well, all of us trying to cover the field as best we could. Despite my efforts at a win, our team got killed; and what was more, the coach was unhappy with me for 'doing his job'. The first game, to say the least, was unsatisfying.

But our team had more foreign players arriving almost daily. We needed all the help we could get and every player with knowledge of the game and athletic ability rotated through positions and made some big plays, but the team – and the league itself – was utterly disorganized and incompetent. Even the officials struggled with the rules, often assigning the wrong penalties for flags on plays. I knew it wasn't just my team that needed help but indeed the entire league. I needed to think. And I would get time for that, in a surprising and unwelcome way.

During a practice, I sprained the meniscus in my left knee. After visiting the doctor, I was told I would have to sit out, so I took the opportunity to reflect on what I needed to do. The person who signed my visa paperwork said I was to pay for my own doctor visits and rehab if it was needed. I regretted not having a contract in place to protect me from the exact thing I feared would happen. With all my years of experience, I'd learned from the best coaches, trainers, and doctors in the world, and I knew what stretches and exercises I needed to do to get better, so I created my whole rehabilitation program. And while I did so, I thought, and I strategized, and I prayed. I could feel my uncle speaking to me again, telling me to man up and take control, and soon I took on a new role, one more suited for my abilities. I didn't belong on the field with players so far beneath me in skill and experience. Where I belonged was on the sidelines—as coach, referee, and American football ambassador. I hung up my shoulder pads and put on a whistle.

I reflected back on my college coaching days, to draw ideas that would help our team be more effective and efficient during practice. This led to me putting together daily practice plans that consisted of drills, plays, and even workouts for the field and the weight room. I understood what it took to not only learn the game but also win and this was new to the team. I wanted the players to get the most out of every day so I started with the basics so they could learn how to truly play the sport. I also began to incorporate English in the practice plan not only for the benefit of my Chinese players learning the language but because it was hard using the translator at every practice, in games, and for everything that needed to be said. Sometimes words would get lost in translation so to eliminate this I aimed to make everything as simple as possible and for us to be able to communicate and

for us to effectively run plays. I changed our offense to a strictly zone team in the run game and put together some pass plays using basic 2 and 3 receiver route combinations. I gave our skilled guys a copy of all the plays, and I also put them on our wristbands. We used Ram or Red for our zone run to the right, and Lion or Yellow for our zone run to the left. I also gave our wide receivers a copy of the route tree where we could give our receiver routes by simply communicating the numbers on the route tree. I would never have used that technique in the U.S. because the opposing team would have caught on in a nanosecond, but I used the language and game-knowledge deficiencies of the opposing teams to my advantage. Since the level of football knowledge wasn't too extensive, this could give us an edge.

Another change would happen, this time in my lodgings. After several weeks in the hotel suite, Martell, myself, and another American James were moved into a 3-bedroom, 2-bath apartment in a high-rise building in the center of another shopping plaza, close to the university where practices were being held. It was a great central location, walking distance from the subway station and countless stores and restaurants. Fully furnished and spacious with beautiful views, the apartment seemed perfect. What I didn't realize before coming to China was that some things Americans consider necessities, Chinese people consider luxuries—one of which was a toilet. Yes, businesses and homes in China didn't have toilets inside them, but I had to insist that my apartment have one, and it did.

Again, Chongqing was 1,000 miles inland, and as such it housed very few foreigners. Martell, James, and I became local celebrities of a sort, mainly because we were three big Black guys walking around the area amid a sea of Chinese faces. We took everything in stride but I did have to make adjustments, and one was food. Authentic Chinese cuisine, I came to realize, was far different from Americanized Chinese. The only thing in common was rice, which came with every meal. The most common type of restaurants in Chongqing were called 'hot pot' restaurants and they consisted of round tables with a huge pot in the middle filled with spicy oil, into which diners would dip the meat and vegetables they ordered until it was cooked to their liking. It wasn't bad, and it was cheap – all the food there was – but I longed for meals that I was more accustomed to. The produce was always fresh and I'd found many fruits and vegetables I'd never seen before. My whole life I'd only eaten one type of kiwi, with the green inside, but I had now seen and tasted kiwi of many different colors and sizes. They were amazing! There was a vast variety of fruit, from oranges, pomelos, durians, and lychee. The taste of bright purple sweet potatoes and lotus root were something to be desired and the unfamiliar yet delicious food options the country had to offer was endless. I finally found a Korean restaurant nearby that served sweet-and-sour chicken – my favorite – and ate there at least twice a week. I also ate tons of fast food—McDonald's, KFC, Burger King—more fast food than I had ever eaten in my life. I was literally overdosing on it.

The fast food restaurants in China differed from those in America and one way was that you couldn't make special orders. You couldn't say you didn't want onions or ask for extra cheese or special sauce on your burger. It came exactly how it was historically made. Even at Burger King you couldn't *'have it your way'*. Finally, after several months of communicating through translation apps and with lots of smiling and laughing, I was able to convince workers at the nearby McDonald's to put cheese on a McChicken and add Mac sauce to a double cheeseburger. It was a small victory, but a victory nonetheless and that

cheeseburger was delicious.

The food struggles continued. The locals ate things that I had never considered eating—Pizza Hut offered *squid* as a pizza topping, for example. I abstained. The cost of fast food was cheap, but the price was high—I knew it wasn't good for my athletic body, and on one occasion I bit into a McDonald's french fry that was so hard it chipped my tooth, and the pain endured for years to come.

The city of Chongqing was bustling, crowded, and dynamic. It seemed the streets, stores, and buildings changed in a matter of days. There was always something under construction, and the hustle and bustle started early each morning. It was odd and amazing to walk into an apartment building that held a resident family in one unit and a restaurant or a hair salon in the next; a few steps farther and I would be walking through a mall. The subway stations were an entrepreneur's paradise—everything was for sale, from groceries to clothes to live animals. It gave me an idea. I was in China on a travel visa and legally not allowed to make money in the country, but I tried my hand and made some pocket money. That wasn't a big problem, but my travel visa would prove to have its own share of difficulty.

Chinese companies often gave foreigners travel visas because they were easier and cheaper to acquire than work visas. To comply with the requirements of my 60-day travel visa, I had to leave the country – or at least leave Mainland China – every two months in order to update my visa. Depending on my schedule, I would either spend a few days in Taiwan or fly to Hong Kong in the morning, walk through customs, then fly back to Chongqing the same day. I admit it wasn't such a bad problem to have since I did love travel, but once when I tried to fly to Shanghai with the team for a game, I was prevented from boarding my connecting flight from Shenzhen. I'd overstayed by 5 days, they said. The rest of the team went on to Shanghai, but I was stuck. I had no idea what to do. By the grace of God, some police officers helped me secure a hotel room and called a cab, and when the cab arrived they instructed the driver to take me to the hotel they'd found. I was grateful.

Since I was stuck in Shenzhen, I decided to make the best of it. I spent the weekend seeing the sights, shopping, and eating, and when I finally made it back to Chongqing and corrected the visa, I vowed never to experience that situation again.

But the visa hassle wasn't the only hardship. Once trying to purchase a train ticket from Chengdu, I missed the last train and tried to get some help from some of the train station employees. The train station attendants didn't want to touch or look at my phone or passport. I didn't know why they were so rude, treating me with total disgust, but I hoped it wasn't an issue of race. I waited in the train station for nearly an hour thinking about where I would stay since I planned to be in a different city that evening, and hoping I wouldn't be forced to sleep at the station. I walked outside, amongst the civilians in the city and picked a direction until I stumbled upon a hotel where I was able to get an available room. On several other occasions, I was denied access to bars, nightclubs, restaurants, and even hotels while traveling. Some said that they didn't allow foreigners into their establishment while others offered no excuse at all. At one hotel I was denied a room by being told foreigners were not allowed to stay but as I glanced around, it showed that wasn't true—the place was filled with *white* foreigners, sitting at the bar and in the lobby, exiting and entering the elevators, and the truth was they didn't want a *Black* man staying there. I was stunned. I'd

spent most of my life in Detroit, where I was one among the hundreds of thousands of black people, and even the racism I did experience wasn't nearly as overt. In America, though this had been a huge issue years prior, I'd never been denied entrance anywhere based on the color of my skin. Begrudgingly but necessarily, I began asking a Chinese friend to book my hotel rooms, flights, train rides, and anything else I felt was too important and wanted to prevent being denied access to. I Facetimed my mother and told her what was going on, and she was infuriated. She told me to keep my chin up and remember who I was, and as usual, I benefited from her love and wisdom.

I tried to make the best of the uncomfortable situation. I made eye contact and smiled, trying to interact with people. Communication was difficult through the use of translation apps, but I got more comfortable with it as time went on. Meeting people was difficult. My instinct was to acknowledge people I met on the street, sometimes saying hello or just nodding and smiling; but I was used to the United States, a diverse and colorful nation. There in China, the country consisted solely of Chinese nationals and almost everyone had the same skin tone, eye color, and hair color and style, so someone from another continent really stood out. I knew I needed to find some sympathetic friends. Whenever I saw a foreigner, I approached them and struck up a conversation, easily making a friend. I asked if they had *WeChat*, the Chinese version of *Facebook* or *Instagram* but with many additional features. I discovered where the foreigners hung out and what they did in China. I wanted to be around more people who spoke English, and through my friendliness and diligence, I discovered where I could find them.

Along with food, transportation in China was a different experience from transportation in Europe. In Europe, I mostly took taxis when I traveled through the Chinese cities. I seldomly took the bus, or the subway, because racism in China kept me from wanting to use public transportation. Once on the subway, a Chinese woman confronted me with unmasked hostility. In fluent English, she asked, "Why are you here? No one wants you here!" I was shocked. I'd wanted to meet more English-speaking people, but hearing racism and animosity in my native language was quite disturbing. I remained calm, and because of her random act of acrimony, I asked her if she needed any help or someone to talk to. She continued to scream at me with hatred and anger, and even smacked my phone out of my hand and hit me in the face. I couldn't believe it. I'd looked racism in the eyes and had been assaulted in the process. *But why?* Why did she harbor so much malice towards me? The only bright spot was that at the next station, when she screamed at the police to apprehend me, they refused to do so. Not only did they not arrest me, they didn't even approach me and asked for her to leave the subway station. It was a small consolation. I'd witnessed Chinese citizens urinate and defecate on the train station floors, even despite the train station being extremely over populated. As a result of these incidents, when I happened upon an Italian foreigner preparing to leave Asia to return to Europe, selling a motorcycle cheap – only 1500 RMB, the equivalent of about \$250 – I bought it, even though I'd never even ridden a motorcycle before. I got plenty of practice late at night when there was little to no traffic and learned quickly. I avoided public transportation whenever I could.

Things in Chongqing were becoming less delightful. After I chose to no longer play for the team upon completion of my rehabilitation process, the level of respect for me, my time, and the knowledge I brought to the team began to diminish. This was not only

hurtful, but it also caused my relationship with the team representatives who'd brought me to China had begun to sour. After my injury, the person who signed my visa paperwork and failed to assist in my rehabilitation even stopped paying me for coaching. The season had just ended after a first round playoff loss, but practices were still being held and I resented the expectation that I would appear and work for free. As a result, I gave practices less priority and only attended if I had time and wanted to go, which caused even more hostility. They started to talk about me to mutual acquaintances, telling them that no one liked me. I knew it was solely because I had my own mind and wouldn't allow people to treat me with disrespect regardless of who they were. Still, knowing I had to provide for my son and for myself, I went to practice when I could, so I could keep the apartment they provided.

I often thought about home, and thought of my family., especially now. I missed them dearly. But one day while riding in a taxi making my way to coach, I'm thinking of them a lot more than usual. I'm thinking of my Uncle and about how much I need his help. I wished I could talk to him. I couldn't help but think, what advice would he have for me? Then, a song begins to play on the radio. A song I'd never expect to hear. In China there were no English songs played on radio stations yet one has just begun to play. See You Again by Wiz Khalifa is playing just as I am thinking of Uncle Raymond and I can't help but utter the words "I miss you Unc", right before tears begin to stream down my face. I am riding in the front seat so I turn my face away from the driver so he is unable to see me crying. I didn't want the first time he saw a black person in his life, he'd be witnessing him crying. As I look out of the window and at the mountains we are driving past, I notice that they seem to have some type of glow around them. When I look at the driver, he is now smiling at me and he too has an aura around him. I think it's the tears in my eyes that's causing my vision to be weird, but as the song kept playing, and my mind kept wandering, all I could think of was how much I missed, loved, and appreciated my uncle. I knew my uncle was watching over me and I felt his presence daily. "Thank you Unc! Thank you so much" I said and as I turned to see the chinese taxi driver, he was still looking at me but with an even bigger smile on his face. I wiped my eyes and continued my ride.

Uncle Raymond wasn't the only family member I thought of daily, and especially since Wendell Jr's birthday drew near, he was always on my mind. We'd just spent his last birthday at Disney World and since I'd never missed a birthday with him, I knew I had to do something special. I thought long and hard about what I wanted to do, and since I couldn't fly him to where I was, I decided to send him some things to allow him to get a feel for China. I packed a box that contained 4 pairs of basketball shoes and some clothes; I was excited for him to receive some Chinese attire, plus a 100 RMB Chinese note (we loved collecting foreign currency) along with a Chinese magazine and a long letter telling him how much I loved him, complete with Chinese translation; and, because he was into anime and karate, a dull samurai sword with Chinese inscriptions on it. I couldn't wait to Facetime with him and watch him open it, and when he did, his smile and joy were bittersweet. I was elated that he liked the gift so much, but I missed him terribly. I promised to see him soon, hung up the phone, and reflected on everything I desired for him and his future. I couldn't wait to hug him again. Soon, I would give him the world.

I expected a return flight to America to be purchased for me, but when I contacted Ben there was no answer nor was my phone call returned. I began to reach out to the only

English speaking Chinese players on the team, letting them know I desired to speak with Ben and the exact reason for that desire; I was ready to go home. After weeks of being avoided by my host, I knew I was in China alone and had to purchase my own flight back. Another one of the many benefits of not being under contract.

The strained relationship with Ben reminded me of my new role and main purpose of my presence in China: I was an American Football Ambassador. I decided to throw a football camp which would be held over the course of two days in two different cities, and each day I would hold two sessions. I started in ChongQing where the first session catered to 6- to 12-year olds, followed by the second for ages 13-20 and above. After both sessions were complete that day, I filled multiple hockey travel bags with the cones, speed ladders, agility step over bags, and tackling dummies used and headed for the train station. Upon arrival in Chengdu, I reflected on the outstanding experience the Chinese citizens and foreigners had as I prepared for day two of the camp. The 2 day event turned out to be amazing. Dozens of people attended in both cities, and I was proud to have thrown such a great event, particularly one that had never been seen in those areas. I was accomplishing everything I set out to.

The extended stay in China changed my mindset a bit. Some things were negative, like the dearth of familiar food and the ubiquitous racism; but some were positive, like the opportunity to change lives in China like I'd done in America. At first, I'd only thought about playing and coaching football, and when opportunities arose to play football in Europe while still in Asia, I turned them down. I felt I was needed in China. People wanted to learn from me, to develop not only football skills but also life skills, and I knew that I could provide that education to them.

I saw opportunities to create jobs for myself and for other people, and I began to develop a business mindset. I could do alot more than coach football. I began to train in the gym I was given a membership to when I first arrived, starting with the athletes I coached for sports performance. I also began to conduct fitness classes for the locals and foreigners in multiple cities. Most foreigners I met on my travels were in China to teach, and I aligned visits to their schools to coach football, basketball, baseball, and soccer, but true to the values that my mother and uncle had instilled in me from a very young age, I went beyond the training of the body and delved into the training of the mind. I created lesson plans that combined sports terms with counting and vocabulary words. I thought outside the box, planning camps and other events where I could help people grow not only athletically and academically, but also mentally, socially, emotionally, and spiritually. I wanted to build international relationships with symbiotic benefits for both parties. I was excited about the future, and I traveled all over China spreading my vision and gathering recruits.

And then one morning, while in another city where I'd been coaching for the past week, I woke up to 6 missed calls and texts from Martell. I knew that couldn't be a good sign. I opened one of the texts and saw that he'd sent a picture of all of his belongings in a shopping cart. I was confused.

I called Martell. "What's going on, bro? Why are you pushing your things around in a shopping cart like a homeless man?"

His response baffled me. "Because I am a homeless man, and so are you."

I almost thought I was still dreaming. But it was true—he and I were being evicted from the apartment. I immediately called my hosts, and after what Martell told me was

confirmed, I informed our host that I'd be in town in a few days to gather my things.

Upon arrival back in Chongqing, I first spoke to my roommate. I couldn't believe that we were being evicted without even a notice of when we would have to leave but I soon found out the team had procured another place for him, he said, but not for me. They didn't want to associate with me any longer and I felt fine with that decision—it was mutual. Still, I needed to get my things.

When I entered the apartment I noticed many of my belongings were missing—not clothes or personal items but my visa paperwork, my original flight information, and many other important papers. A shot of adrenaline rushed through me. Where were my papers? I needed those! It was then that I remembered one night, while sitting on the couch talking with James and Martell, one of the team reps entered the apartment unannounced—with a key. Someone from the team had entered my apartment while I was gone and stolen my things. I was shocked and angry, to say the least.

I packed what was left and exited the apartment. I walked onto the city street, and realized with a wash of dread that I truly was alone and a stranger in an eerie and hostile land—and I was homeless. But I didn't have time to pout. I still had to travel and coach. I lifted my chin, walked to the subway station, and headed north out of Chongqing.

I stayed in hotels and couch-surfed, including at the house of a friend in Chengdu. The friend even left me a key when she left for the United States, with the agreement that I would help with rent and utilities. It was nice to have a friend who cared enough to ensure I had shelter whenever I was in that particular city. I was never in one city longer than 3 or 4 days, but at least I never had to fear the possibility that I would have to sleep outside in a foreign country.

I stayed busy, but in quiet moments I remembered with anger and resentment the gracelessness with which I was told that I was being evicted from my home. It seemed so senseless. Hadn't I turned my life upside-down to come there? Hadn't I trained and coached the team from an embarrassment into something passable? I knew that I had. But I wasn't worth a phone call or a heads up about the possibility of being uprooted from the place I called home while in China. So when the calls came from some of the players on the team wanting me to come coach or play in their games, they would know why I respectfully declined—if I responded at all. I could not associate with their team to that capacity ever again; I knew that with all my heart and mind. They would definitely need me again but for now they had to see that they were better with me than without me.

Chapter Nine

LONGEST 20 SECONDS OF MY LIFE

*But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."
Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses,
so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.
-II Corinthians 12:9*

Life changed for me when I left that apartment. I'd always been driven, but being homeless in a foreign country sparked a fire in me that I didn't know I had. I needed somewhere to live and something to do, and I needed money. And I needed it *now*.

China's interest in sports was growing rapidly. I knew I could capitalize on that interest somehow—if there was anything I knew, it was sports. I looked around me. Every day, I saw people playing soccer, table tennis, badminton, and many other sports. But there was one sport they seemed to enjoy more than any of the others: basketball. China was absolutely fascinated with it. NBA billboards lined the streets. Buildings were draped with famous faces holding basketballs. Chinese people lined up for blocks to purchase apparel endorsed by NBA players. And, I realized, most young Chinese people assumed all Black men could play basketball since that was what they saw on television and on the internet. I could hardly walk by a basketball court without someone asking me to play.

The basketball courts were always full and the football fields were as well but they were full of people playing soccer. I knew in order to reach the amount of people I desired, I had to wear my Kobe's twice as much as I wore my cleats. My natural athleticism saw me on court after court, and soon I got opportunities to coach more basketball that saw me traveling to different parts of China, from Shanghai to Shenzhen to Chengdu to Guangzhou and many other cities to coach and network. I was certain to require my travel and accommodations be covered, on top of my coaching fee, before I agreed to coach.

But as always, I didn't stop at just coaching the young people; I also integrated general health, education, and love into my curriculum. The combination worked, and soon I'd built a successful coaching business, often working seven days a week. Even the team representative who'd evicted me from my apartment contacted me many times to coach and train their players again, which I knew they eventually would. I politely declined.

Arena football was now moving to China. A better league than the one I was coaching in and with players from America with tons of previous professional experience. I'd played with and against many of the players who would soon be in China playing in the league and I was excited because I knew since I was already in China, and had previous pro experience and film, I too would be playing in that league. Soon, things wouldn't be so hard for me, I would be back playing the game I loved and I would be making \$2000 a game, the league would house me, and they would fly me back to America. Even greater, playing again would help spread knowledge of the great American sport and continue to grow the brand that I had been building since my arrival into the country.

Meanwhile, I also did some speaking engagements, some of which were panels of other foreigners in China but the one I was most proud of was for the American Embassy at

the United States Consulate General. I spoke from my experiences, talking about football, the life of a professional athlete, and the coexistence of sports and education in American culture; and I ended the presentation with entertaining clips from NFL games. Many of the attendees worked in government, either Chinese or American, but these weekly workshops were open to the public and there were foreigners present from multiple countries as well as some of the Chinese locals both young and old. I enjoyed it; even more so when the audience was really engaged. They asked questions during the Q&A portion, and afterwards people approached the stage, where I allowed them to wear the football equipment like shoulder pads and a helmet, equipment they'd never even seen in person, much less worn. They *oohed* and *aahed* and took photographs of their friends wearing the equipment, smiles plastered on their faces. It was the best part of the day. I had never anticipated that I would speak in front of so many people on behalf of my country, but it was a great honor and privilege and I cherished it greatly.

Things were starting to go well and though I started working extremely hard with the sole purpose of purchasing a plane ticket home, I now wanted to stay longer. I wanted to continue to build the brand and business I'd started, but first I had to renew my 60 day travel visa. I had weeks until my passport expired also, so I would have a new passport when I went on my next trip out of the country. I arrived at the American Embassy for my scheduled appointment, whereupon I was told I needed new passport photos. I walked to a nearby store and had them taken, and then returned straightaway. I knew I needed that paperwork in order to travel – or even exist – in China.

Once I finally returned to the Consulate General with new passport photos in hand, I paid the renewal fee and was told to return at a certain time to retrieve my new passport. I returned after a few hours only to have a representative inform me that they were unable to give me a new passport. I didn't understand why since this was the single most important piece of paper that existed to me at the time. I needed my passport to do any and everything, from booking a hotel room to purchasing a ticket for a train ride or a flight, or simply to identify myself. I was an illegal alien without it and officers in China had the right to stop foreigners while walking out on the street, frisk them, and ask for their identification, which consisted of passport and visa. If you didn't have proper identification in your possession the officials had the legal right to detain you. Many thoughts ran through my head when I was told I would not receive my passport. I asked why I was being denied my only form of identification while traveling as an American in a foreign country? And was told, my passport was being confiscated because of unpaid child support. Though I had been making child support payments and sending money western union, I had been inconsistent in doing so, since the payments from the team stopped. But, I still couldn't imagine owing so much that it would warrant my only form of identification being taken from me and paying the full amount I owed was the only way for me to receive my passport.

I had paid for my passport to be renewed but I didn't have enough money to pay the full amount I owed to receive it, so I asked if I could pay some of the money to get my passport then pay the rest later. "No" the Embassy representative shouted, "That's not how this works. The ONLY way you can receive your new passport is after your debt is paid in full." I was in a state of complete shock and asked the Embassy representative I was speaking to, what I was supposed to do without any identification? What if I get caught

without a passport? It was necessary for me while traveling and even living to have access to my passport or some form of identification. There was no way I could go anywhere but the man simply said “well sir, that's not my problem, I can't help you, until you pay”?

I left the embassy and walked down the street aimlessly. I didn't know what I would do next. Where would I go? How would I get there? If I had gotten killed right there in the middle of the busy Chengdu intersection, I would have been a John Doe. Nobody would know who I was, no one would have come to claim me, and my family wouldn't know or be informed. I was naked without my passport and getting to my next destination was impossible without it. I had to figure out how I was going to get around. I had to coach and conduct business meetings but I was hundreds of miles away from where I needed to be. Yet here I was, unable to get on a train or board a plane. I had to think fast, and after hours of thinking and worrying about what I would do, my translator Ling called me with great news. She was able to set up what was the Chinese version of an Uber for me, and I was blessed to get a driver willing to take me six hours away.

Ling had been accompanying me for months on many of my trips and meetings. She had been a huge help to book trips and lodging online since I was unable to read Chinese therefore had difficulties doing these things myself. This time the process differed when we arrived back to ChongQing, she was forced to book the hotel room in her name because I was now without any form of identification. This fact only made me more anxious, and I went into survival mode because I now had to earn enough money to get my passport back. Having this problem occur made me reflect on what exactly I wanted to get accomplished with my time in China. How was I to impact both the country I was currently stranded in and my own? I turned up the pace on how often I officiated football games, and coached players individually and teams for both football and basketball. I also did more individual training for fitness. Along with conducting 2 fitness classes one day a week at a new gym, I was asked to conduct these classes there 3 times per week. I had a few meetings set up with some Chinese businessmen as well that would help bring my vision full circle.

Soon Ling would have to go back to her hometown and as she was preparing to leave, I knew I too had to leave the hotel. I had things to get accomplished during the week, and traveling had now become more difficult but I was met graciously by my friend Dee from Ohio who offered me his guest bedroom for as long as I needed. Though Dee was in China doing business, all of the American citizens within the country looked after one another. Because of that small blue book with the eagle and stars and stripes on its pages, we were all family. I took my American brother Dee up on his offer and took my bags to his home, I would be there for the next week, until I went back to the American Embassy. All I had to do was add a few more coaching and training sessions to my work schedule then I would have enough money to retrieve my passport. My thoughts then went to my travel visa renewal, I was just days away from the 60 day renewal date and I hoped I wouldn't have another expense to pay after just receiving my passport.

I prepared for a football game in which I was the head official. With my striped shirt, white hat, whistle, and flag, I jumped inside a taxi and started off to the local university where the game would be held. I was extremely familiar with the 2 teams that were playing, one team from Chengdu and the other from ChongQing, and both had previously brought me into their practices to help coach at least once at some point during my stay. Many of the players from the team I originally came to China to help were in the stands watching

and some even came to the field to express how much they missed seeing me around. It was an action-packed game and as I officiated, I also coached players of both teams to help them not only play better, but to also get a better understanding of the game. The players weren't the only people on the field who needed help, I also helped coach the other officials, explaining everything they needed to know in order to successfully officiate a game without me. I then thought of having a clinic which would help those interested in officiating these games do so in the correct manner. Another thing to throw on my to do list.

The game was full of excitement and after the big win by the visitors from Chengdu both teams met at a nearby Hot Pot restaurant to eat and celebrate the fun they'd had playing the great American sport together. Everyone, even the officials were in attendance at the dinner and people were able to speak about football in their hometowns in the US and China. We all begin to think about ways we can cooperate with one another as we put together plans involving the youth in China. I was also asked to visit more of both their practices to help them learn more in depth about the game of football. Both teams had at least one coach from America who had high school and college experience playing but none to the extent in which I had previously played and coached. I gladly agreed to make myself available to assist them and asked for them to reach out to me during the week to put their teams on my schedule. It was just what I needed.

While eating I received a call from my friend ArNez who was originally from New York but was in China working. He asked if I wanted to accompany him to an event he had been invited to, and since the night was fairly young and I had yet to make any plans, I decided to meet up with him once I left dinner. Myself and another referee who was from Texas left the dinner together and since we were going near the same area, we shared a taxi. We spoke about his experience in China as a foreigner, his experience as a middle school teacher, and how he lived in the country with his Chinese wife. I was informed that he too experienced much racism while in China, most of it at his school from parents and even coworkers, but he wanted to make the most of everything until his wife was comfortable enough to leave for America. He spoke on why he wanted to officiate football games in China and how he's always been a huge fan of the game of football wishing he could play. He wanted to see the great American sport thrive in China. My new friend from Texas spoke to me about some of the other hardships he faced while in the country, including one run in with the law, where he was extorted for \$50,000. Speaking with him about so much in such a short time span put a lot of things in perspective for me. He had been there for many years and not only could he speak the language, he had been engulfed in the culture and had a wife there. He understood their way of life far better than I did.

I made it back to Dee's home and showered. I was finally able to take off the footlocker striped shirt and put on some decent clothes to enjoy the evening out. As I dressed I contemplated not joining ArNez because I didn't feel I had much to celebrate at the time. I had no passport, no money, and many things to do, but clubbing was not one of them. I reached for my phone to call and let him know I was no longer interested in going out until I noticed many missed calls and texts informing me that my brother from The Big Apple was headed to Dee's place and we would ride together to the event. Many local celebrities had been invited to this event on this particular night and the venue was a pretty well-known bar in the city of ChongQing. I had been to this bar several times before and

had even met the owner on multiple occasions. It was always a good environment but tonight with such a big event being thrown many of the city's important people were present for the extravaganza. I knew this evening would be like no other night.

As Arnez and I exit our yellow taxi in front of the bar, the first thing I notice is the fleet of luxury cars parked right out front. The Lamborghini, Aston Martin, and Maybach Benz I walk past affirm that ChongQing's most affluent people were in attendance. There were pictures being taken of those present as they entered the venue and even a huge board with the name and logo of the bar near the entrance, where everyone took a final photo and autographed the board before entering the bar. We are escorted to our own private section, facing the crowd, bar, and dance floor. With a bottle of cognac on ice and glasses already sitting on the table, we sit down and the owner of the bar and a waitress soon approach us. ArNez and the owner of the establishment began to engage in conversation speaking Chinese. ArNez, a black American who was now considered a local celebrity as he had become a social media sensation, and a comedian, known for making short videos on a Chinese social media platform speaking the local Chongqing dialect. Three Chinese women come to our section and sit with us, and soon after the waitress reappears with cola and puts ice in each of the glasses on the table, then pours some cognac before adding some of the newly delivered cola. "GamBei", the six of us say cheerfully before we all take a sip of our freshly mixed alcoholic beverages. After about 15 minutes my friend and the owner of the club, in their own personal conversation, stood up and left our section to walk around the club speaking to others in attendance. The three women who were sitting in our section stayed. As I take a sip of my drink, I ask one of the women sitting next to me for an ice water, and she hurries away at my request. After a few minutes of interacting with the other woman through translation apps, the woman returns with my ice water and sits with us. Myself and the 3 women continue to engage in conversation, one of which can speak some English but not good enough to completely verbally communicate. We continued to use the translation apps mostly, but after nearly 15 minutes of just the 2 of us talking, and not being able to fully communicate with one another, our communication ceased.

ArNez was still networking in the bar as I stood up in our section alone enjoying the evening and watching others do the same. I'm looking around to see if I recognize anyone in the bar but not only do I not see anyone I know, but I don't see any other foreigners at the event besides ArNez. I decided to walk about the bar and with my 2 cell phones and portable charger in my left hand and my mixed drink in my right, I walked down the stairs from our section onto the lower level. I passed more private sitting areas on that level, glancing around the room seeing what was going on and who all were in attendance. I still don't recognize anyone there and now I don't see ArNez either, but I continue my stroll. I walk around more and after I pass the bar and the dance floor on the second level, I stop near the stairs leading to the lower level where the physical bar and dance floor were actually located. Standing near the top of the stairs, im looking into my phone all while watching everyone enjoy their evening. I and everyone else present were indeed having fun and as I stood near the stairs, I moved aside for other club goers if I were in their way restricting them from passing.

While standing alone facing the dance floor, I am pushed in the back. I turn around only to see a Chinese man standing about 6'1 and slender, staring at me. Thinking I may just be in his way and he wants to get by, I step aside to allow him more space to walk. "You

can go around” I state, but the man doesn't speak nor does he desire to walk pass, he just stares me directly in the eyes as if he is making an attempt at intimidating me. After watching him stare at me for a few seconds, I turned my back to the random Chinese man and began to watch the crowd again. As I look towards the bar once more, I'm pushed in my back a second time but with more force which leads me stumbling down the stairs I am standing near. I catch my balance at the bottom which prevents a huge fall, and I turn around to see the Chinese man who just pushed has come upon me. Hands still full with my belongings, “what's wrong with you”, I asked as I returned a shove which sent the Chinese man stumbling into a nearby table. I've never seen this man before and I wonder what I've done to offend this random person. The Chinese man then grabs one of the many beer bottles on the table that stopped him from falling and while standing less than 3 feet away from, after grabbing the beer bottle by its neck, he raises the bottle above his head and throws it directly at my face.

It seems as if everything is unfolding before me in slow motion, like i'm spectating yet still a part of all the action. After watching the man launch the bottle, I'm able to lean the upper half of my body to the right and out of direct line of contact. I watched the bottle just barely miss my head. Once he notices he has missed his target, he looks to his right just a few steps over his shoulder to another Chinese man standing at another table, and I push him further away from me. The man then pulls a knife out of his pocket and hands it to the second man, who has now come to his friend's side, and proceeds to beeline towards me with the knife heightened well above his head. I see the sharp metal object clear as day. The lights inside the bar flicker different colors and as the knife gets closer, it too changes in color. The knife is now almost directly over my head and I wait just a hair more until the man is within arm's reach of me before I move my head and body to the side and from underneath the knife. I want to create as much space as possible between myself and the man welding the blade so with all the strength I can muster, I push.

They must be plotting on how they will stab me. I take another step back and as the two men gather together, I see their mouths moving. I can only hear music but I know they are speaking about me because they never take their eyes off me. I put my phones in my pocket and ball my fist up preparing to defend myself but they aren't running in my direction any longer. I thought to turn my back and walk back to my section but the thought of the last I turned my back to the men was fresh in my mind. I take 2 more steps back until I feel my feet touch the stairs that I was just pushed down. I turn around and walk up the stairs to my section, but repeatedly looking around, anticipating another attack.

When I arrive back at the private section I notice ArNez and the club owner still aren't back so I sit down and pour myself a drink from the cognac bottle sitting on our table. Still in shock about what had just taken place and uncertain if they would return to confront me again, I quickly drank my beverage and sent my friend 2 text messages. The first, “some guys just tried to jump me”. The second, “I'm leaving bro, let me know when you're getting out of here”. Though I'm extremely nervous and my heart is beating fast, I walked out the bar just as cool and calm as I walked in. It's Saturday night so when I exit, I am met by many people walking, talking, and drinking outside. The city is very lively and well-lit so it didn't take long before I figured out where I would go next. A block away was the bar that Dee owned and that was one of the places the foreigners in ChongQing would hang out, party, or have events.

Upon my arrival I told Dee everything that I had just experienced. Surprised that anyone would attack me then He asked if I was ok and if I was chased out. I responded, "I'm fine, unharmed and no I wasn't chased away." "My brother, you're so lucky that the entire club of people didn't jump on you or chase you out into the street. That's what normally happens here!" Dee stated. I sighed in relief because I was indeed blessed, those men could have very well killed me. I relaxed in the bar with the other foreigners who were from all over the world and there were a few Chinese citizens in attendance also. After hours of drinking, dancing, closing time had come but everyone present even Dee didn't want the night of festivities to end just yet. We collectively decided to continue the evening at another bar. We stopped at a nearby bar that was pretty empty so a discussion ensued to determine where our next party location would be. Everyone, as if sharing a brain, decided on one very popular place, everyone but me. Our next destination was the same place I was attacked just hours before.

The thirteenth of us walk down the street to the bar and though it's after 2am, the event is still in full swing. The entire group stands together to take a photograph in front of the standing autograph billboard in front of the bar just before walking in. Once inside, we all go directly to the dance floor and begin dancing. The bar is not nearly as crowded as it was earlier in the evening but there are still many people present and enjoying themselves. As I dance with a woman, I see 2 security guards standing with a police officer on the other side of the bar and both pointing in the area of myself and my group of colleagues. Once I notice the group of Chinese men in uniforms glaring at us and I begin to walk in their direction. Some of those with me see me walking towards the officer and security guards near the entrance of the bar and begin to follow me over.

The Chinese men are all trying to communicate something to me but none of them speak English and no one with me at the time could speak Chinese fluently. After a few minutes, 2 other officers arrive and It is then that I heard one of the officers say in English "you have to come with us". I wanted to know where they were going and just as the thought cloud appeared in my head, he responded "outside"! When I heard this, one of the guys with me repeated what he said. 5 other foreigners and myself go outside and try to communicate with the officers but at this time it's so much commotion outside. Many Chinese people have now come around and begin to scream and shout, and the only English-speaking officer says, "You have to come with us to the police station." I'm extremely concerned at this moment because even though I knew the reason the police wanted to speak to me was due to the altercation in the bar earlier that night, I had no idea why I needed to go to the police station to talk. I asked if I had to go and I am told yes, which led me to ask, "Am I being arrested? Are you about to handcuff me?" "No" the officer replied with a smile, "we just speak to you there".

I wasn't being arrested and the police only wanted to speak to me. I was relieved, but only for a second. My mind was still racing and the rowdy crowd of civilians now growing in number added a truly uneasy feeling to the situation. They began to yell louder and act more aggressive when some started to spit at us, with the police unable to control them. It's only six foreigners surrounded by at least 50 Chinese nationals and since my arrival to China, I'd seen many videos and heard of groups of citizens attacking foreigners, especially Black Men. In some cases, beating them lifeless. I had also just experienced it hours earlier with two men armed with weapons attacking me for only God knows why. Those videos

and my experience all came to the front of my mind and seeing how the police were unable to control the crowd, I grew fearful for the life of my friends and myself. I run. And all over again, I'm running so I can live and not die.

I ran as fast as I could down the street with nearly 50 Chinese people chasing me. In my attempt to get away from the Chinese mob, running with all the speed I possess, I turn a corner. That's when I saw an officer ahead, I ran up to him and stopped, hoping to get protection from those who were pursuing me but when they arrived, I was assaulted by everyone within arm's reach. The random locals who were chasing me began to beat me, hitting me with everything from their fist, to chairs, and even the plastic tables that we set up outside but the local street chefs. I cant believe the police officer who I just ran to for protection is allowing this to occur. I am then grabbed and handcuffed by an officer. I believe it's the same one I ran to for safety and the assault by the civilians continues as other officers arrive. I'm thrown into the police car and assaulted more by the officers as we ride to an unknown destination. I am bewildered, disgusted, and scared shitless. I never saw my night going in this direction. Forced to endure civilian cruelty, police brutality, and now bloody after being ferociously beaten. *How could this be happening?*

Chapter Ten

WHY THE CAGED BIRD DOESN'T SING

It is hardly a moral act to encourage others patiently to accept injustice which he himself does not endure.

-Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Loud screaming can be heard coming from afar. I can't believe I'm in jail! I've avoided serious trouble my whole life and now I'm in a country that isn't my own and in the most trouble I've ever been in. I'm in a place where any and every negative thing could possibly happen. Being the only foreigner, completely out of my element, and alone, in a jail cell full of hardened criminals. The one thing stuck at the front of my mind is beatings. Beatings that I had already taken by random Chinese people, beatings by my arresting officers, and beatings that could take place by inmates and officers inside the jail that would leave one extremely wounded or even worse, dead! Just the thought is crazy. Physically being there, I knew even from the opening of that huge front gate, the first step I took inside the cell that this would truly be the worst experience of my life. And no one was walking in to save me.

It didn't take me long to find out what that awful stench was I smelled as I walked through the cell. Human feces are all over the wall and the floor. The hole in the ground that was used as a toilet is surrounded by human waste. I am appalled at the condition of the cell. The overcrowding, the insects crawling and flying around, the garbage, the filth, the feces. *This can't be real.* With every eye there locked on me, I had no idea what to expect next. The combination of being in my thoughts while lying on the floor with 30 other people, withstanding the smells and dirty conditions of the cell was causing my head to spin and hurt uncontrollably. Being in the middle of all Chinese people yelling and fighting was a terrible feeling, I felt extremely unsafe. Even though I hadn't gotten much sleep, I didn't want to close my eyes. I dozed off twice during the night but I would wake up abruptly checking my surroundings for two reasons. First, I didn't know what anyone would try to do to me while sleeping and second, I was still in disbelief of where I was. I had been awake for more than three full days and I felt the real crime would be going to sleep.

The next morning when the national anthem began to play, I somewhat had an understanding of how things were done. Just after the wakeup call it was clear, the first thing I saw everyone do was put on their blue jersey, which I did also and began folding up my pallet which consisted of two blankets and we stacked them one on top of the other in the corner of the cell. I still hadn't figured out my water situation just yet so without it, I put some of the toothpaste I was given on my finger toothbrush and brushed my teeth and

tongue. Soon the bars are opened and we are let out of the inner cell. Once in the outer cell everyone begins to grab their bowls for breakfast. I quickly take notice of the fact that I am literally inside of a cage, as I look up and see the ceiling is nothing more than iron bars, about 40 feet off the ground. I can see the open morning sky but the sun isn't present to shine on my face. I start wondering if anyone had ever tried to escape, thinking only if they could scale the high wall which would then allow them to hang from the barred ceiling. *I'm sure those bars are welded on and ensure they don't move, and neither can I.*

There is a loud banging outside the shut steel door and everyone creates a line to receive their breakfast. Small buckets were stacked up the cell and were used as chairs for each inmate. Those buckets were put into 2 lines within the inner room and after breakfast everyone sat down until the correction officers would enter the cell to do their morning rounds. There were 4 officers who accompanied the head officer, who was in charge of the entire jail. The group of officers visited each cell twice a day to count how many inmates were there and called each by name. Once the police officers left the cell, the inmates were all locked back into the inner room of the cell and everything went back to what would be called normal for the environment I was in. Loud talking, arguing, gambling, and fighting for the entire day. There was no leaving the cell at all, I was encaged, on 24-hour lockdown.

I only saw one person leave the cell for a few moments with an officer, and I had no idea why he was escorted out but he was the only person who wasn't wearing an officer uniform I saw allowed the freedom to exit our cell. Every inmate was to sit on his bucket, and all of us in a straight line, but with everything that took place within the cell, that never happened. There was a huge poster on the wall and on this poster were the jail rules. I was given a sheet of paper with 150 rules, all of which were written in Chinese but only 38 of them made it to the wall. I later received an English translation with 20 of the rules that were on the wall. Each day between breakfast and lunch, the entire cell had to read those rules on the wall aloud. Unlike the yelling and screaming that happened throughout the day, these were together in unison. As I listened to the screams coming from other parts of the building I knew the same thing was happening in every other cell. When an inmate first arrived at jail, they were forced to learn these rules then stand up and recite them while everyone else was allowed to sit. I don't think individually reciting the rules this way was mandatory within the jail, I just believe it was something the inmates decided to do for fun and to keep the inmates minds occupied for a short time. Even though I couldn't understand what was being said, as the inmates recited the rules I just, I sat, watched, and listened.

I began to notice the daily routine within the cell. One part of the daily routine was when the inmates were given water to drink. This was important because the water from the faucet was sewage water but at some point, during the mornings after the officers had done their count of the inmates, a pipe within the outer room was turned on and scalding hot water began to flow from it. At that one of the inmates would run out and push a 32-gallon trash can that had been designated for water in front of the pipe. This caused everyone to hastily run out with their cups in hand to get the blazing hot water to drink before the bars that divided the inner and outer cell closed. Everyone sat and around 11:30am the gate to the inner cell was opened again and the inmates were allowed to exit

for lunch. It consisted of the same process as breakfast but the food just changed. The menu consisted of many different dishes I'd never seen nor heard of before. Some days I noticed things such as pig skin, or pig blood, or tofu, and with every lunch and dinner there was rice and a vegetable served. Since I'd seen what Chinese people ate everyday while free, I didn't want to know what was really fed to the inmates, so I kept a strict diet of rice and whatever vegetable was being served. After lunch was eaten, we were then locked back into the inner cell, told to put our makeshift beds back on the floor to lie down. It was a mandatory nap time. Inmates were not allowed to write, read, or even have their eyes open during the hour and I couldn't believe there was a mandatory nap time enforced. I felt like I was in kindergarten again, and just like everyone else there, I laid down but unlike everyone else there I couldn't sleep.

A bit after 1pm, the music starts up again and that's the queue for everyone to wake from their naps. The volume within the cell went from low to extremely high in the matter of seconds, and it stayed that way up until 5pm, when the inmates were granted access to the outer cell once more before dinner was dropped off. Dinner served by the prison was only rice and vegetables and unless inmates had purchased other things to eat that would be their last meal until morning. After dinner, access to the entire cell is still warranted while everyone waits for the officers to count the number of inmates within each cell just like the morning process. I assume this was to ensure no prisoners had escaped though I didn't see how it was possible with every inmate being on 24-hour lockdown. The officers usually came around 7pm and this was the same time the TV was turned on for the first time during the day. What the inmates watched on television was controlled by the correctional officers and daily from 7p-7:30pm the national news is what was watched. After the news ended, the television was turned to a channel that showed Chinese sitcoms and we watched this from 7:30pm until 9:30pm. This was the only time the inmates weren't completely out of control during the day and since I couldn't understand what was being said on tv, I thought I would use the only time I had to do some type of physical activity, read, or write. Everyone had their blankets out and pallets made, so I began to do pushups and sit ups on mine. Officers could look down into each cell from above and every 15 minutes an officer was to make rounds around the building looking into each cell. This was not done as often as every 15 minutes but at times the officers were seen walking past. As I went down not allowing my chest to touch my blanket and coming back up an officer walked past doing his rounds and yelled into our cell. I didn't know who the officer was yelling at nor did I know what he was saying but many of the inmates gestured that he was talking to me and for me to stop working out. Once they stopped talking to me and the officer continued on his rounds, I resumed my physical activity, which led to a completely different officer yelling into the cell minutes later about me discontinuing the only form of physical activity I had.

Since my arrival to the jail, I wondered where and when I would be allowed to shower. I soon found out the allotted time for showers was also tv time. As some of the men began to undress and walk towards the rear of the cell, I saw where my new shower room was located. In the middle of the back wall a knob rested and 3 feet above that knob is a single faucet. These things were directly over the hole in the ground where human

excrement still laid. *This can't be how my showers would now be taken on a daily basis. Standing on top of shit.* The last time I showered was hours before I was arrested and though I was sprayed with a water hose when I was first brought into the jail, since I didn't use soap, I really didn't count that as a shower. Showers were now completely optional as no officer forced those inside the facility to shower and once the few people who did decide to shower were finished, I chose to shower as well. I didn't have any soap, and an inmate offered me a new bar to which I declined because I'd heard years ago that the first rule to being in jail was, do not take anything offered by any other inmate, no matter how simple and small it may be because you will have to repay that inmate something, somehow, someday. I knew I had to figure out how to purchase personal hygiene products and other goods.

My area to sleep was the closest to the shower and toilet, and as I undressed, the conversations began to slow and every eye in the cell was now on me. Naked, wearing only the too-small shower shoes I was given to wear upon arrival, I turned the knob to turn on the water. I let it run for a little while, waiting on the water to get warmer but to my surprise it stays freezing cold. As I stood over feces and under ice water, I'm in complete disbelief. *What am I doing here, locked in a cage drinking hot water and taking cold showers? This can't be my life!* Once the clock hit 9:30pm the television shut off, the lights shut off, but the noise continued, all through the night.

The sound of the steel door opening cuts through yelling, and the bars to the inner room begin to open as one of the 5 officers standing outside yells. Every inmate turns to the rear of the cell to look at me and they too begin shouting and pointing. I stand and walk towards the officers and when I get to the entrance of the cell I'm aggressively grabbed by my arm, turned around, and tightly handcuffed. It's my first time leaving the cage since my arrival and as I am turned around and out the cell, I see 12 soldiers wearing army uniform, holding military grade assault rifles, standing 6 by 6 and at attention. *Why are they standing here in front of me?* It's 17 total Chinese officials around me and I have no idea what's next nor where I'm going. Those in army uniform continue to stand at attention as the 5 officers escort me through the facility and I finally get to see the layout of where I'm being held. The building is a huge, 2 level, square, with the inside of the infrastructure completely open to see both grass and sky. My first time being outside and feeling the fresh breeze across my face since I arrived in handcuffs to the facility. Seeing the sun shining in the open sky made me think the last time I saw such a site was when I officiated the football game. It felt like months ago but in reality it had been just a little over 72 hours ago. I hoped I would be taking those handcuffs off in a matter of seconds and never putting them on again. I'm escorted past many other jail cells until we reach a huge 20 feet steel door that the officers had to use a key card and numeric code in order to open it. Once through the steel door I was led to an area with many 2 sided rooms, all of which have a single desk on one side, and seats with a table on the other. The sides of the room were separated by both bars and bulletproof glass and these rooms were used for interrogation or meetings with lawyers. When I finally got inside an interrogation room, I noticed 4 Chinese people all in government official uniforms which were black suits, white dress shirts, and red ties, with a People's Republic of China pin on the left side of their jackets. Only one person was

wearing a police officer uniform on the other side of the bars and glass. The restraint on my right wrist is taken off then I'm directed to sit at the lone desk in the room. Once I sit at the desk, my wrist is cuffed again but in front of me this time and to a small hole in the middle of the desk. The Chinese officials who are on the other side of the room begin to speak to me but not in English. I now have no idea what this meeting is about. While I sit there, handcuffed to a desk and listening to people speak at me, not being able to respond, I feel hopeless. The government officials use the intercom system on the wall to call for one of the prison officers to come to the interrogation room. When the officer arrives, he is handed papers for me to sign and put my fingerprint on. I try to decline stating that I don't know what it says, but I am not allowed to decline. The officer grabs the small container of red paint, puts my hand in it and presses my thumb on the page. Since my hands are cuffed to the desk each time I tried to move the tighter the handcuffs got around my wrist. The officer then throws a pen on the desk for me to sign with. Though I have no idea what the paper says or what the people around me are saying, I understand fully that I have only one option.

Later that afternoon, I am again called to the front of the cell, handcuffed, and escorted to one of the interrogation rooms. After being handcuffed to the desk, I notice on the other side of the glass and bars is the only foreigner I'd seen since the night I was free and attacked by the Chinese citizens. It was a representative from the American embassy, and he was accompanied by a Chinese woman who also worked for the American Embassy. There were also 3 Chinese government officials there but they only stood behind those from the American Embassy as they sat. It was a huge relief to have my government officials in front of me and I instantly asked them what was going on. I wanted to know why I was behind bars, and when I would be freed. I had no idea of these things nor when I would be allowed to leave because I was told by my arresting officers that they just wanted to talk to me but I was now locked away. The representatives of the American government told me that information about my case is still being gathered but my family had already been informed of the incident and my current location. I didn't know how I should feel about that. I was happy my family and my government knew I was in jail but I didn't want to disgrace them, my family nor my country.

"We don't know exactly when you will be free, but your family has been given a list of local lawyers who may be able to represent me and help speed up this process and get you out of here", the Embassy representative stated. I honestly didn't think I would need a lawyer but knowing the conversation my family and the embassy was having, it made me ask what else I needed to do in order to be freed, but the government officials didn't have the answer to that question either. I was asked, despite the circumstances, if I was ok inside the facility and how I was holding up, but when I tried to talk about the conditions of the cell and what was happening inside it, I was prevented from doing so by the Chinese officials who were present, saying it was forbidden for me to speak about these things. As I spoke with the American government representative, I was told the entire altercation was caught on video but they hadn't been allowed to see it. Hearing this put a smile on my face and since I had done no wrong, I felt in the coming days when I was called to the front of the cell again, it would be to be released.

Though it had only been days since I had spoken to anyone, it felt like forever and I was finally able to speak and hear people speaking English. The highlight of the visit besides it being my first one, was that I received a Bible. My mother specifically requested I have a Bible brought to me and she sent a message, asking me to stay strong and continue to grow closer to God during this time. She also wanted the representatives to tell me not to worry because I would be home soon. That message from my mother along with the bible lifted my spirit and knowing my family along with my government not only knew everything that was going on at that point but they were also taking the steps to ensure I was released lifted my spirits as well. So, I just had to wait a few more days. Now that I had my bible, I could grow closer to God through scripture. I prayed each time prior to opening my Bible, asking for understanding and though there was constant noise around me it was now being drowned out by the spirit of God as I read. After I received the good news of the gospel, I then got into meditation which allowed me to receive the understanding I had prayed for prior to reading.

It seemed as if I was being called out of the cell more often now as officers were coming to interrogate me multiple times a day. Unlike the first time I received a visit by Chinese officials, a translator was now present and I was asked to verbally walk the officers through the entire attack each time an officer came to see and speak with me. I'm not sure if each time i'm interrogated it was by the same officer or not but I did know the Chinese officials who were assigned to translate my words seemed to never be fluent in English as I spoke to him, so as I relived those moments which lead to my imprisonment, I spoke slowly to ensure nothing would be lost in translation, but knowing he doesn't fully comprehend.

3 Days after my visit from the American Embassy, I'm called to leave the cell again. Since their first visit, each time I was called out, I hoped it would be to take my blue jersey off me and walk me through that huge steel door outside. This time as I was being cuffed to the desk I noticed a Chinese man in a suit. All the Chinese people who had come to see me up to this point had all been government officials in some sort of uniform so I was surprised to see a Chinese person in street clothes, or not accompanied by an American. He begins to speak to the officers who have escorted me from my cell to the interrogation room and then hands them some papers through a small cut out area in the bottom right of the bulletproof glass and bars. I'm given those papers and a pen, then each place I was to sign was pointed out to me. After I signed 3 of the 5 pages, the red ink was handed to me and I put my fingerprint on each place I signed, then the papers were handed back to the man sitting on the other side. I still have no idea who this man is, what this visit is about, nor what the papers are that I was just told to sign, until the officers leave. The man in the suit surprises me and begins to speak fluent English. He starts, "Your family and friends have hired me to be your lawyer and those papers you just signed were simply authorization for representation." I was truly hoping I wouldn't need a lawyer and that I would just be released but I loved the fact that my family and friends were trying to do whatever it took and to bring this problem to an end. He then asked me how I was doing in the cell and if I was having any trouble, to which I responded, the only trouble is that I am not yet free. The next part of our conversation consisted of me explaining the entire

incident to my lawyer which felt like the 100th time I relived the events. It felt good to finally walk through the attack with someone who I could fully explain everything to and not worry about important facts getting lost in translation because I wasn't allowed to talk these things through with the American Embassy when they came to visit me. The lawyer wanted to get clarification on some things so he asked me, "Why did the men attack you? Did you know them? Why did you return to the bar?" All of these were good questions but I didn't have the answer to any of them. I didn't know why the men decided to attack me. I didn't know who the 2 men were nor had I ever seen them prior to being attacked. And, from the moment the police spoke with me, I wondered the same thing, why had I returned. In my heart, I felt I'd done no wrong, besides those men attacked me and all 3 of us walked away healthy and on our own free will, so I initially didn't think I was doing anything wrong by going back. But, when I thought everything over while sitting there handcuffed to the desk and speaking with my lawyer through bars and bulletproof glass, I knew I should have never reappeared.

My lawyer ended our meeting by asking if I had any messages for my family. I just wanted to thank them and to let them know I love them. He then asked if I needed money or anything, to which I responded, "I need to get outta here! And soap, if i'm going to spend another day in here" After these words, that was the end of our meeting and he called the officers to come take me back to my cell. Upon my arrival to my cell, I felt like things were moving forward and that I would soon be free. The hiring of a lawyer made me hopeful, as the Embassy told me I would need representation to speed things up and I now had some. Not only did I tell him everything that happened that night, but I even expressed how I felt about the entire situation. He made me feel like everything would be ok and he even told me he knew exactly what to do to get me freed. He told me everything but the truth. The truth was, my lawyer didn't want to represent some random black American and I never saw nor heard from that lawyer again.

When I was called out of my cell, most of the time it was to speak with police as they were always interrogating me about the attack and asking me to explain the incident over and over again. I didn't know if they expected me to change any details in my story or what the point of asking me the same things was but all I could do was tell them exactly what I experienced. At this time, I also didn't know about my lawyer situation because I hadn't received another visit from the lawyer that had me sign a contract of representation so I hoped the American government would come to visit and talk to me again, but I didn't know if or when they would.

A month had now passed and I understood fully the daily routine within the jail cell I was being held in and since I was on 24-hour lockdown, unless I was being questioned, every day was the exact same. Wake up, fold up my blanket, brush my teeth, eat breakfast, be counted by the police, recite the rules, people gamble, argue and fight, eat lunch, take a nap, wake up, work, people gamble, argue and fight, eat dinner, be counted by the police, watch Chinese sitcoms, go to sleep, with a few deviations in there sporadically. The days were extremely long and as I sat there, I thought I needed to do something that would help the time go by faster, so I decided to get into a routine of my own. Once the Chinese music played to wake everyone, I opened my eyes, took 3 deep breaths, and I thanked God. I then

stood up, folded my blanket, and quickly thought back on the dreams I had while sleeping the night before. After eating breakfast, I would ask God to help me understand those dreams then I meditated on the things I saw and heard before I wrote them down. I waited a short time to brush my teeth and wash up until the hot water was given to us and that was always before the officers came to the cell for roll call. Before lunch, I had some time to pray and meditate, then I read my bible until lunch and nap time. Once it was time to get up from naptime, it was time for everyone within the cell to work and depending on the season the job would differ. It would range from making boxes, incense, or many other things I'd never seen. Some days the officers would enter the cell and give each inmate a wood block and a steel sphere to flatten objects with. I had no idea what this was for but everyone had to work nonstop or be dragged out by police. On these days I watched my surroundings a bit more closely because with all the arguing and fighting that took place and each inmate now having a weapon, I knew the cell was completely unsafe. I would not be the person being beaten to death with a shotput.

There were afternoons when we didn't have to work, and I used the time to get deeper into my bible, and afterwards I meditated on what I read. I saw other inmates who used some of their time to write and I too wanted to write. I wanted to write to my family but I had no access to a pen nor paper and I wondered where I could get some. One morning during roll call I gestured to the head officer that I desired both pen and paper, and later that day I was blessed with both. It was extremely therapeutic for me and since I was unable to verbally communicate with my family nor anyone within the facility, I was able to express myself through my pen. I wrote letters to my family and friends, but I also put my thoughts and feelings down on paper also. I was trying everything I could think of to make the time speed up all while ensuring I was growing mentally and spiritually despite my surroundings. This always led me to dinner time, and until the officers came to the cell for roll call, I would spend more time reading. One day I asked to speak with an officer, and luckily it was one who could speak a small bit of English. I had no idea there were English speaking officers there and I now knew if I needed anything I would ask for that specific officer. My reason for requesting time to speak with someone at the facility was to ask for permission to do any type of physical activity within the cell. I saw on the list of rules I received that inmates should have been allowed 1 hour of physical activity each day, but physical activity had been forbidden within the facility. After my inquiry, I was granted time from the moment the police left our cell after roll call until 8pm to do as many pushups and crunches as I could. Daily within that 25-minute span, I would do 5 sets of 100 pushups and 10 sets of 100 crunches, and it was a great way to relieve stress while focusing on something other than my location and situation. After my quick workout I would take an ice-cold shower and I lay down with my back up against the wall and my eyes on everyone in the cell, before the lights went out.

My family and friends had sent money to Ling which allowed her to purchase things for me that I needed while inside and still bring me cash to buy other things. That list ranged from food to personal hygiene products all the way to ink and paper. Though I had received sweatsuits and a coat, the cold was starting to get to me and not just the cold water which hit my body when I showered but the cold air that circulated through the cell 24

hours a day from the outer cell that lacked a real roof. The seasons were starting to change and nights were freezing. Whenever I received another visit, whether it be from a new lawyer of the American Embassy, I had to ask for a coat and as many blankets as they could give me. In the winter months, I folded one blanket to lay on so the floor on which I slept didn't feel so hard and 2 or 3 blankets I used to cover up for warmth. I also slept in all my clothing every night, my sweatsuit, my coat, my skull cap, everything, because it felt as if I was sleeping outside.

I began to dream in my sleep more than ever before when I arrived in prison. Prior to, I could barely remember if I dreamt at all and each day, though I wanted to keep my eyes open to watch what was happening around me, when I slept, I saw so much. My dreams had never been so vivid and every other day I would be in need of more ink for my pen and paper in order to write these things down. When I would pray and meditate on them, I asked God for understanding of what the things I was seeing and hearing meant, what I was to do about them, and how I was to go about my days and the rest of my days inside that cell until I was finally able to go free.

Getting adjusted to daily life within a Chinese jail cell was the hardest thing in life. How could I get used to life in jail? I've never been in jail or anything remotely close but now I'm being forced to stay. I was missing so many things I had become accustomed to having and now I had to figure out how to get them. How could I get things such as tissue, toothpaste, soap, deodorant, and good food to eat? I saw people who had these things, I just had to figure out where I could get them. Nearly every day, things were getting delivered to the cell and distributed among inmates. People were buying goods but I had no idea when or how they were ordered. When the one officer whom I knew could speak English came to the cell, I asked about certain items and inquired about how I could get them. "Give me a list each week of the things you want to buy and give it to me", he said. He planned to use the money I received from family and friends to purchase the listed items for me. This was huge because I had been without personal hygiene products for long enough and though I could now buy things, I would have to still be without some items I needed; Deodorant mainly. Most of the inmates' breath and bodies smelled bad, but I didn't know if it was because mouthwash and deodorant couldn't be purchased and I hoped I wouldn't smell nearly as bad as them without deodorant. I didn't know what all I had access to buy because I couldn't read the list but I thought of the things I needed and wanted most and I also watched the things being delivered that other inmates had purchased to help make my list.

On a beautiful and sunny day I am walking outside my cell led by multiple officers. I am directed to sit as I am handcuffed to the desk inside one of the interrogation rooms. There were 4 Chinese officials, 2 men and 2 women all on the other side of the glass. As I sat there with my eyes closed, praying to God, asking for protection and good news, one of the men began to ask me in English.

What are you doing?

I'm praying.

Why?! Do you think God will help you?!

Yes!

I am Your God!! And no one else can save you!!

This catches me completely off guard, and I can't believe this officer would say that to me. I didn't want to disrespect him as he had just disrespected me but I no longer wanted to talk to him, so I closed my eyes again and went back to talking with God. I knew and believed, even though this certain government official didn't, that God could and would indeed help me during my tough time. Soon representatives from The American Embassy entered the room. I didn't know when they would visit again, I only hoped they would and I was certainly happy to see them. After informing them I received a visit from a lawyer but he hasn't been back and I didn't know why, I was told that he was no longer my lawyer and= my family was trying to find me another at the time. I asked when I would get a phone call and when my family, friends or anyone else could come see me. I was told that I could not receive visits from family and friends; only Chinese and American government officials were permitted access to see me. I thought that was terrible news until it got worse, "and you won't be allowed to use the phone at any time while you're within this facility either", the Embassy worker said.

I wanted to know how my family was holding up and the embassy had a few notes written down from my family. Despite what I was experiencing this brought a huge smile to my face. My mother requested that she be able to receive a handwritten letter from me since she wasn't able to see my face nor allowed to hear my voice. I was then given a pen and a blank sheet of copy printer paper. I thought how can I possibly do this? It was extremely difficult for me to write because I couldn't be uncuffed. I'd signed my name many times while handcuffed to a desk but now I was preparing to write a full letter and I was thrilled at the opportunity to do so. With both my wrists planted to the desk, I held the pen as tight as I could in my right hand and began to write to my family. It was good to be able to send some words to let them know that I loved them, I missed them, and that their love and prayers, along with the power of God, were keeping me strong. The embassy continued to inform me of everyone's efforts to try to get me released, but they just didn't know much about my case as the Chinese police and government officials weren't releasing any information to The Consulate General. This is one huge reason why having a Chinese lawyer was vital to having the situation come to an end as quick and possible and me being released. Chinese lawyers knew the law and the government officials would speak freely to them, as opposed to the American Government officials or even any foreigner whom they didn't want to speak to at all, so I waited as I should be receiving a visit from one soon. This was uncharted territory I was in and though it was as small as delivering letters, what my government could and were doing for me, it was greatly appreciated.

I was excited to go free, and though I was in a very disheartening situation, I knew I had to keep my faith strong and my spirits up, not just for myself but for my family as well. The letter I wrote was passed through and translated aloud by the Chinese man who told me he was my God, to his colleagues. The representative from the Embassy then told the

officers they brought me more clothing. Letters from my family were then handed to the same man who translated the letter I'd just written to my family. They too had to be translated by him before the jail officials took them to translate as well, and only after this process was complete was I allowed to receive them.

Nearly 3 weeks had passed and I still hadn't received my letters. This was a painful process because the only access I had to my family were their letters and they were refusing to give them to me. After weeks of asking daily for my letters, I finally received them and I felt like a kid on Christmas morning. I couldn't wait to read my family's words. The letters were accompanied by a few photographs as well and it felt amazing to see my family's smiling faces. Me, A foreigner, receiving letters and photos all the way from America made many people in the cell jealous and since I didn't allow anyone to see pics of family and friends. While we ate lunch one day, he tried to force me to go eat in another area, by telling one of the other inmates whom until that moment I didn't know spoke English, to tell me to move. I hoped I didn't have to get into a physical altercation at this point, because I was told I would be leaving soon and I didn't want to do anything that would hinder or delay that process, but I also wasn't going to allow anyone who was an inmate just as I was tell me or force me to do anything I didn't want to do.

This only made the inmates I shared the cell with begin to complain to the police about me more and though I'm not sure what was said exactly, this led to officers storming my cell, me being cuffed, and another inmate grabbing all my things and throwing them into the new cell I was escorted to. Maybe those men were talking about harming me or maybe they were saying I was trying to harm them. Though I was unsure, making eye contact with the 12-armed officers in military uniforms outside when I was escorted to the other cell, gave me the feeling that I was the sole reason they were standing there and at attention, with their rifles ready.

I didn't know what the requirements were for moving into another cell but apparently, I met them and as I am uncuffed and picked up all my belongings off the floor I walked through the new cell with everything I possessed in my arms. I got déjà vu as the entire group of 30 Chinese inmates stared, pointed at, and discussed me the entire time. Though I had come from a country in which a great many nationalities reside, I had to remember that more than 90% of the men currently incarcerated had never seen a black person before, let alone been in a room with one, so I took the weird looks and pointing lightly. This process though it was inconvenient, it wasn't a complete disappointment as I was able to get in the same area of my new cell as I had in the other. I went to the rear of the cell, with my back against the wall, and it didn't seem like anyone wanted to kill me for it this time.

Chapter Eleven

I CAN'T UNDERSTAND YOU!

We must take the profit out of prejudice.

-Coleman A. Young

It was hard to communicate with others due to my lack of ability to speak the Chinese language, and not only was I the only foreigner in this new cell, but I was also the only English-speaking person there. Weeks later I found out it was one guy in there who could speak some English but we didn't speak much because he didn't like speaking to me. The only time he said anything to me was when he had questions about me or my case. I wasn't there to make friends and honestly, I didn't mind not being spoken to because it allowed me to closely study myself, read my Bible, pray, meditate, and anything else I could do to make it through what I was experiencing as productive and as safe as possible. I tried to learn a bit of Chinese but because no one wanted to talk to me, I did this by watching others communicate. I saw how they interacted, and listened to the things they said. I also began to pick up miscellaneous items within the cell and ask random inmates what they were to hear the pronunciation of the words. I tried this with the small things I had access to like the small chairs we sat in daily, my cup, bible, toothbrush, water, I even pointed to the television, and the hole in the ground that was used as the toilet. Knowing a few words helped me hear when I watched others within the cell interact with one another and I knew I would soon turn my one-word responses to complete sentences.

I'd learned some of the racial slurs while I was free and I also learned that I was not liked by many Chinese people simply because of my race. This was the same while imprisoned, other inmates didn't like me nor did they want to communicate with the black person, but I always heard my Chinese name being said, so I knew they were speaking about me daily. I received my Chinese name from a Chinese girl who worked in the gym I was training out of. After one of my group sessions, she approached me and began to speak, then just right before she departed, she reached out her arm to shake my hand. I was surprised by this gesture because we never spoke to one another, not really by choice, we just couldn't understand each other. One of my young Chinese players who attended the workout session was next to me so I asked him to translate what the young lady had just said to me. "She said you're a good man, and she likes what you do in your training sessions. She said, your name is Wen Long." Chinese people always had English names but not many foreigners had Chinese names yet I had just received one. I then asked if it was a good name and what it meant. "Yes, it's a great name", the young man replied. "It means Knowledge Dragon."

In China, dragons are revered as mystic creatures that symbolize power, authority, health, strength, and good luck. After hearing the meaning of the name, the young woman had just given me, I too liked it but I didn't think I would use it or ever hear it called. That is, until my first time being interrogated at the jail when one of the officers asked me if I had a Chinese name. I then remembered the young lady, the name she had given me and I remembered that I was the Knowledge Dragon. "Yes" I said, "my Chinese name is Wen Long."

Despite knowing all the inmates were talking about me regularly, I knew what they had to say about me didn't concern me. I just had to make sure I stayed positive and stayed away from things and people that were going to upset me. I was focused on not allowing where I was nor what I was going through to control me, my thoughts, or my feelings. This was easier said than done but I was focused on keeping a good mindset, focused on myself and God, and focused on being patient enough to literally just sit and wait.

Wen Long! An officer yelled as the steel door and the bars began to open on the outer cell. All the inmates then echoed my name as I stood up and waited for the bars on the inner cell to be opened. After being handcuffed by one of the 3 officers present, I was escorted to one of the interrogation rooms where there was a Chinese man and woman sitting and waiting for me to arrive. After I am handcuffed to the desk the woman begins to speak and she is speaking English. She introduces the man first as lawyer Feng Pi and herself as Ms. Wang. She then tells me that my family hired lawyer Feng Pi to represent me and get my case resolved. The man then leans close to her and whispers in her ear after which she begins to speak again. "It will soon be lunch time", she expresses, "We will come back to visit you in the afternoon." The man, while looking at me, speaks again, but he's speaking Chinese. They both see the confusion on my face and the woman begins to translate his words. "When we come back to see you this afternoon, we will talk about your case."

As these 2 people sat in front of me, I could feel something was not right about my new lawyer and his translator. Maybe it was the bruises on the woman's neck as if someone had been licking on her just moments before. Or maybe it was the look in the man's eyes. They were dark, not the color of them but what was behind them. From my view, they appeared to be without any light. Yet I was excited, so these things were not at the front of my mind. I could only think about being freed and never wearing handcuffs again. The lawyer and his translator summoned the officers in the facility and when they arrived at the interrogation room, papers were passed from the lawyer to the officer then to me so I could sign them. I remembered signing these same types of papers before but I hoped the outcome would be different this time and the lawyer would stick around. After signing my name and putting my fingerprint on the paperwork, it's passed back to the 2 people on the other side of the glass. As I am released from the desk and stand in preparation to leave, the woman says, we will see you this afternoon. I smile and say yes, then I thank them both. Once back in the cell, everyone is already sitting and eating, so I grab my bowl of food, sit down, and try to eat. I have no appetite at this time because my mind was too busy thinking of what was next and what steps my lawyer would take. As everyone laid down to nap, my

mind began racing even faster, so I laid on my back staring at the ceiling and waited for the afternoon. "Thank God I finally have a lawyer".

I could finally verbally communicate and express myself and as I explained and walked my lawyer and his translator through the entire incident only stopping to allow translation, I felt relief. I felt I was days away from being free. The lawyer then begins to speak and afterwards it is translated to me, "We've watched the video on CCTV, and we have also spoken with the lawyer of the man you attacked. In order for you to be released, you only have to plead guilty and pay 2 million RMB". My mouth dropped because I couldn't believe what I had just heard. Everything that was said to me in response to explaining the altercation, seemed crazy. My lawyer had watched the video of the incident yet chose to say I attacked a man. "No" I exclaimed. I am not doing either one. Feng Pi proceeded to say, I must plead guilty and pay 2 million RMB in order to be freed. I was appalled and this led to me asking my lawyer a series of questions.

"If you watched the entire video, how could you possibly say I attacked anyone?" Their response was that they indeed watched the entire video and that myself and another man were attacking each other.

I didn't understand that answer so I in return asked, "Does self-defense exist in Chinese law?" The translator responds "yes, self-defense does exist in Chinese law."

I then stated, "So you both have watched a video where I am being attacked by multiple men with weapons, in a justice system where self-defense exists, but I'm supposed to enter a plea of guilt. Though you have yet to tell me what I'm being charged with, I have to pay my attackers 2 million RMB. This is the craziest thing I've ever heard."

I was then told that one of the men involved in the altercation had been hurt. When I asked how could anyone have been hurt the translator said "You hurt him. You knocked his eye out." I chuckled after I heard this which surprised my lawyer and his translator. Though I felt after all I'd been forced to experience, I probably should have, but There was no way I knocked a man's eye out of his head. Especially without even throwing a punch. I pictured a scene from a cartoon where a character's eye flies far away from his body as the words Pow showed up big on the television, then I remembered everyone involved walking away, perfectly fine. I was asked if I would agree to plead guilty and pay again but I answered the same as I did before, No. This caused the meeting to come to an abrupt end and the officers were called to the interrogation room to retrieve me. Before they left, I was given the lawyer's business card and the translator also wrote her number on it saying I can call either one of them if needed and I was taken back to my cell.

The room seemed louder than usual, and I can't seem to figure out why. Maybe it was because I couldn't stop hearing the words of my lawyer's translator, "you hurt him. You knocked his eye out". How could they say that to me knowing that wasn't true? How could they tell me to plead guilty knowing I'm attacked by multiple men with weapons and for absolutely no reason at all. My life was in danger that night yet I'm behind bars, and now my life is even more in danger inside this cell. For only God knows how long. It didn't take

long for the hostility to increase within my cell and no matter how I stayed to myself I was still the odd man out and the most hated person there. I did everything I could to stay free from trouble and my place at the back of the cell had great advantages, as it was needed. I meditated daily but as my eyes were closed and I was diving deeper within myself, my ears were open. I began to hear and could distinguish between voices. I could hear their voices go up and down where the other inmates' words were spoken out of excitement, anger, or fear. Though I couldn't understand everything, I was beginning to hear some of the words I had been learning and I could feel the energy of everyone around me. Even without seeing, I could hear and feel people as they stood up, sat down, or approached the rear of the room. The only thing behind me was the toilet and no one was able to get there or back without alerting me.

Using the card I received, I often asked whichever officer present when they came into my cell to contact my lawyer. I did this by simply handing them the card and turning my hand into a phone with my thumb and pinky finger and putting it to my ear. Once they took the card from my hands, I reenacted a gesture I saw many times within the country. I bowed my head, put the palms of my hands together as if praying, and moved them back and forth. This gesture was done to give thanks or as a form of gratitude. Initially it took a couple days for my lawyer to arrive after I called, but the meetings became redundant, and his appearances became less frequent. If I hadn't received a visit in 3 to 4 days after asking the jail officials to contact my lawyer, I would politely ask them again. As time went on and our conversations became monotonous and mundane, the arrival time began to slow. Where it only took days for my lawyer and his translator to come speak to me, I would now go over a month without a visit from them, even with asking officers for 2 calls in a week.

I wanted to know exactly what was going on with my case when I saw my lawyer so each time he arrived I had the same questions. "What are the police saying? When will I be free? What are they doing? When will I be free???" But as I expected to hear news from him, he was also expecting to hear something from me. Something I was just not willing to say.

"I've done absolutely nothing wrong! You told me self-defense exists and you watched me be attacked on video! Now here I am, speaking to you from behind bars and I shouldn't be! Why should I have to plead guilty? I am not guilty of anything"!

My lawyer and his translator held a conversation without me, but I know that their relationship is different. They often spoke amongst themselves and often left questions concerning my case unanswered. I know the way they interact with one another would differ from how they interact with me because in their eyes I am just a criminal. They looked at me as an unwanted, black American, who committed a crime in their country. But, the way they spoke to and looked at one another just didn't have a business feel, they looked at one another with admiration yet they looked at me with disgust and were always extremely rude when they spoke to me. Watching the way they interacted with one another as I asked important questions began to make me feel uncomfortable and I'm starting to understand why every time they visit, the translator has a neck full of bruises. I then start to feel like I'm talking to a brick wall. Why do they keep trying to make me plead guilty? Why are they completely disregarding what I'm saying and refusing to listen? And it didn't take

me long to get the eerie feeling, like they were not on my side nor did they didn't care what really happened to me. They had no love for me and at times I felt my lawyer's sole purpose was to get me locked away forever.

The police officers, investigators, and prosecutors often visited me and the majority of the time a translator wasn't present. On these occasions I was forced to sign many papers and I didn't know exactly what was signing nor what these papers said because a translated copy was not presented to me. I often tried to avoid signing but after extensive amounts of time enduring the Chinese officials slapping my head and face, screaming, and not being able to be uncuffed and escorted back to my cell, I would sign whatever was in front of me. I tried to ask for English copies and I even pleaded with them to no longer abuse me while sitting there unable to understand why I was being beaten, berated, and forced to sign things but the Chinese men couldn't understand me and I couldn't understand them either. In my eyes the officials didn't care, I knew they didn't care, so I had to take whatever they were giving me to sign, be quiet about it, and happy that they didn't make sure I disappeared. I was unallowed to use the phone and if I wanted to contact someone, I had to ask the jail officials to call for me. The only people I could call were my lawyer or my government officials, no family, and I wasn't allowed to physically touch a phone. In fact, I never with my own eyes saw one.

Many of the rules that we read every morning were not kept by those over the jail, Though they said we could get phone calls and visits we couldn't. The rules also stated that there was to be no smoking but twice a day an officer came to our cell and gave cigarettes to a few of the inmates. I have no idea how they decided which inmates received them but some days the lucky inmates decided to share. The officer passed a lighter through the cell's bars and after one cigarette was lit, it was used to help others light theirs. Daily, as I sat there longer and longer, I noticed the rules, laws, and anything else put in place to create order really didn't matter. They were just there for decoration.

The longer I waited for my lawyer to come see me, the more convinced I was that he never wanted to represent me. In my heart he didn't care if I died in jail. It had been months since I was first encaged, and I had already been there so much longer than I had expected to be. I was watching people come into the cell, stay a few days, then be released and I couldn't help but wonder what their lawyers had done to get them released so quickly. This made me put even more pressure on my lawyer, calling more frequently, and being more stern when asking what's going on with my case. I often asked how long I would be forced to stay in jail but I was never told anything. The initial 3 month period of any case in the chinese judicial system was for involving parties to come to some sort of agreement but it seemed as if there was no timeline which would lead to my pain ending. The length of my visits when Lawyer FengPi and his translator came to visit began to get shorter and shorter. None of my questions were being answered just like normal but I was being asked one question also, "are you ready to plead guilty?" Once I said no, that would be the end of our conversation and he would leave. Pay and plead guilty were my only options and my lawyer at this point didn't plan on looking into or even thinking of other options. I've been inside a cage since September 2016, my 30th birthday has come and gone. It is now January

2017, a whole new year, and I'm still trapped, speaking through bars. At this point I'm willing to do anything that would get me released.

On the next visit from my lawyers, I was given a letter from my mother to read before our meeting was to start. My mother was expressing her concern and fear that she would never see me again if I continued to refuse the advice of the lawyer that has been hired to help get me home. She stated that things differ in the country I was imprisoned in, as opposed to the one I was born and raised in. My mother, listening to everything the lawyer was telling her, wrote insisting that the only way for me to get home was to do exactly what Lawyer FengPi said. In silence, I reflected on what my mother wrote and before I could speak a word I was told that my attackers were willing to reach an agreement, and if I agreed to pay, I could be released, almost immediately. I would have to pay half the said amount upfront and the remaining balance in installments, but I would be outside and free. After months of uncertainty, I agreed to this and looked forward to ending my imprisonment but when my lawyer came back days later, I was told that the deal can only be offered to me if I agree to plead guilty. I was willing to do a lot but forfeit my innocence was the one thing I was unwilling to do. I had already agreed to pay the amount of money they wanted for attacking me and though I couldn't believe how much money they had requested I agreed. I hadn't done anything to those men, I only prevented them from hurting me and we all walked away. I'm innocent, not guilty. They were going to let me out, they had to.

TangMoa, a Chinese inmate in my cell who was highly respected and feared by both the inmates and officers. Everyone in the cell called him "boss" in Chinese and in China if someone has a lot of money, that's enough to be respected no matter if they are a good or bad person. Money is King, Money is God, and Money is both Power and Respect. Though to a certain extent this is true anywhere you go in the world, in China it is the sole thing that matters. In China people will bow to you if you have more money than they, and he was one of the wealthier guys in the cell. Whatever he told people to do, they did and he even had access to things outside of the cell. TangMao was one of the inmates able to get cigarettes and even get food and drinks of his choice that were not on the order list. He was able to pretty much do whatever he wanted within the cell and outside the cell. Daily he was allowed time outside the cell and days when I would be handcuffed heading to an interrogation or meeting with my lawyer, I would see him uncuffed and unaccompanied by police. I saw he was a jail favorite within my cell and outside of it also. As I began to learn and understand more Chinese, I would hear him speaking. He often said bad things about me and I heard talking and laughing about how he was able to get my lawyer's contact information from the officers, call my lawyer, and pay him to come and talk to him about my case. I couldn't believe this was even possible, not only did the jail officials allow him access to my personal belongings but my lawyer came to see and speak to another inmate about my case. I would hear him talking and laughing with others in the cell about paying my lawyer more money to come see him and talk about me than I gave him to take my case and represent me. He often told other inmates within the cell things about me, acting as if he knows who I am, what I do, and what I've done prior to my arrival in China.

I had already known TangMao didn't like me too much but hearing these things confirmed my thoughts about my lawyer. Lawyer FengPi was completely untrustworthy and did not have my best interest at heart. I had no idea what to do and the next time one of the officers came to my cell, I asked if I could go to another cell. I had gotten tired of the talking, the insults, the threats, the laughing, the lies, and I just wanted to be removed from the space altogether. The officer told me that he couldn't move me to another cell, which made me ask if I could be in a cell alone, like solitary confinement but I was told, those places are for inmates who have broken rules and needed to be punished. I thought solitary confinement had to be better than listening to threats and insults all day long. "That's fine, I would still like to go", but my request was denied.

Sitting with my back against the wall eating my bowl of cabbage and rice, and just like each time we sat to eat, there was a lot of arguing. But today, an inmate stands up and with the hard plastic cup in his hand, swings and breaks it over the top of another inmate's head. There is blood everywhere and the entire room is in an all-out brawl. Not knowing if some of the men in the cell were waiting for this opportunity to attack me as well, I move aside with my back in the corner of the cell and watch everything that's occurring, ready to take action if needed. As officers finally come to the cell with riot gear on, throwing inmates around, and the fighting subdues, there are multiple men laying on the ground in pools of blood. The first man who was hit is one of them, and the man who hit him is another, but he laid there lifeless, with many stab wounds on his body.

The next time my lawyer came to see me it was just different than every other meeting. I had requested to be released on bail in our previous meeting but I was told that my bail had been denied. And just as I was about to ask about why I had been denied bail, the translator begins to yell.

"You need to plead guilty! You need to confess to what you've done!" This came as a surprise to me because the meeting had just started seconds ago and it seemed as if they had been speaking to each other prior to arriving and planned to force me to enter a plea of guilt. My response never changed when my lawyer and his translator tried to convince me to plead guilty. I asked if self-defense exists and if there was video of the incident. I knew the answer to these questions and I knew what was on the video so when they responded yes, I simply said I shouldn't be locked up. I should be home free with my family. From this point, the translator begins to yell in Chinese but soon switches to English. She is so loud I'm sure people in the other interrogation rooms can hear. She screams,

"You will never go home!! You will never go home!! You will be in jail for a very long time!! You're never leaving this place!!"

"What was I supposed to do?" I asked.

Screaming, "You should have ran, now you have hurt that man and you're never going home!! You should have ran!!"

I can't believe what I'm hearing. The man who did everything to avoid the confrontation still hadn't done enough, I should have ran too. After I hear this, I decide to reply.

"But I walked away. Even when I got pushed the first time, I allowed the first man space to go past me, but those 2 men were hell bent on hurting me. Even though I had done absolutely nothing to those men, their minds were made up and they wanted to hurt me."

This was the worst meeting ever because the more I spoke to my lawyer and his translator the more I was convinced I was in a losing situation with my representation. They would make sure I died behind bars before they agreed that I was innocent. I then asked the translator, "what would you have done?"

"I wouldn't have done anything!" she yells. "I don't have the strength to do anything!"

I couldn't help but reply, "You? You, who are yelling so loud and are so angry that the vein in your forehead is protruding, wouldn't have done anything? You want to hurt me right now and I've done nothing but disagree with you. I don't believe you would have sat there and done nothing to keep yourself safe."

Lawyer FengPi looks at me and begins to speak. He says that not only does he have a copy of one of my attackers' medical examinations but he also accompanied him and his lawyer to visit the doctor. My mind instantly jumped to when I was told one of my attackers had an eye hanging out of the eye socket. My lawyer told me this led to his eye needing to be surgically removed from his head. I am in complete shock and instantly feel I'm being fed all lies. I can't believe what I'm hearing because I have full recollection of the attack and I know what occurred that night. I know my actions did not result in anybody losing an eye. He then speaks further and his words cut deeper than any knife can. "All the evidence is pointing against you and if you don't enter a guilty plea now, I will not be able to help you."

"What was I supposed to do?" I asked. "I stopped those men from hurting me then everyone walked away. I've done nothing wrong, yet you want me to plead guilty, I'm innocent." The translator then screams, "you're thinking like an American, not like a Chinese person!"

"I'm not thinking like an American, a Chinese, a Russian, a German, or anything else" I replied. "I'm thinking like a person whose life was in danger because he was attacked. I'm thinking like a man who was told defending yourself is legal." Watching my lawyer and his translator in rage and listening to them yell at me saying I will never go home unless I do something that I feel I shouldn't have to do and things that I know are wrong, was discouraging and very disheartening. I'm sitting there handcuffed to the desk trying not to lose hope but I feel my hope fading fast. I just wanted to see my family. I just want to get home to my son, my mother, and all those who love me. I no longer wanted to be around so much madness, so much hatred. I just wanted to go free.

I no longer wanted to converse with people who were untrustworthy, yet these were the people who were here to defend me, and to speak on my behalf because I couldn't speak for myself. My life was in the hands of people who were treating me worse than I'd ever been treated in my life. I'm listening to everything, all the things my lawyer told me, all the messages from my family telling me to listen to my lawyer because he knows how to get me home. The messages spoke about how the law differs in the country in which I was being held prisoner in than the one I was born and raised in. After being yelled at, berated, mentally, physically, verbally, and emotionally, abused for many months by almost every person I'd come in contact with since being imprisoned, they had succeeded and made me feel like there was nothing else I could do. I felt like the only thing I could do in order to be freed was to plead guilty, though it was going against my better judgment. Pleading guilty was going against everything I learned in college through studying and receiving my degree in criminal justice. Pleading guilty went against everything I knew to be right. They made me feel, as an innocent black man locked away in a foreign country, after being attacked and knowing that self-defense is written into the Chinese law, that I didn't have a chance to walk around without hand or body restraints ever again. I felt like I shouldn't have had to plead guilty and I continued to express that to my lawyer but I said if that was going to get me freed, I would plead guilty. I felt lower than I ever had uttering those words, and with my forehead pressed on the desk and tears rolling down my face, I said it again. "Ok, I will plead guilty."

After all the time I had spent within that cell, trying to stay strong, I felt defeated. This is what each Chinese person, from my attackers, to my lawyers, to the police officers inside the jail was waiting for. I didn't understand how this would free me, but the only people I could talk to about my case, the people hired to get me released were telling me, this was the only way. I knew it was wrong but how else was I to get home. The mental anguish I faced daily was far more excruciating than the physical. Not knowing. Not knowing when. Not knowing how. Not knowing if ever. I couldn't take it any longer, I'd had enough. The tears just wouldn't stop. *I can't believe what I'm about to do.* I'm pleading guilty.

Chapter Twelve

DREAMING OF FREEDOM

For God does speak-now one way now another- though no one perceives it. In a dream, in a vision of the night, when deep sleep falls on people as they slumber in their beds.

Job 33:14-15

Lawyer FengPi is smiling for the first time since we met, and he begins to speak very fast. Though he is speaking Chinese I clearly hear the word “Tomorrow” in English. His translator informs me of everything else that was just discussed between the two. They both would be back the next day so I could sign the necessary paperwork in order to move forward with my case and I would then be told exactly when I could be released. Extremely distraught, but no longer allowing my eyes to express it, I was escorted back to my cell. Despite the noise, I could hear nothing but my own thoughts. Thoughts of freedom, but thoughts of imprisonment, forever. I was more terrified now than ever before. How much longer would I be incarcerated? My future was now up in the air. I still had not been convinced by my lawyer, my family, nor myself, that pleading guilty was the best thing for me, but I was cornered. Cornered because I couldn’t get my lawyer to visit me or tell me anything as it pertains to my case. Cornered because the one who was to speak on my behalf wouldn’t speak to me at all. Cornered because the only option I had been given was guilt. Completely Cornered.

Lawyer FengPi was only interested in me pleading guilty and didn’t want to see or talk to me if I wasn’t entertaining that topic. I was stuck and it hurt. Inside my cell, my head was in so much pain that I skipped the few minutes I was given each day to do push ups. I had so much to say but only one person I could express everything to. That night as the TV and lights went off, I submerged my head along with the rest of my body under my blanket and I began to pray. I prayed harder than I had ever prayed before and made all my requests known to God. I was so emotional as I pleaded to God that I began to cry. I knew God had led me to this cage but I didn’t know exactly why. One thing I did know, it wasn’t to leave me there nor to put my fate in their hands and I expressed this to God. I expressed my gratitude, my love, my faith, my trust, but also my pain, and my confusion. I’m not crying loudly where the other inmates can hear but tears are running down my face and they can’t be stopped. I knew I didn’t deserve to be in prison but I didn’t know what way to turn, what way would lead me home. I didn’t know what to do, so I asked God to please

show me, to please tell me what I should do. I wanted to be freed so badly that I'm begging God. I asked him to please give me a way out. I asked him to Save me.

I fall asleep praying and pleading, and while sleeping I have two of the most vivid and impactful dreams I'd ever had in my life. In the first dream I had, a young child around 5 or 6 years old and I were sitting at a table with food in front of us. We're about to eat hamburgers and fries but the young boy begins to take things off his hamburger. He takes the lettuce and tomatoes off and throws them onto the ground. I can't believe he's done this and I respond by slapping his face. I then look sternly into his eyes as he holds his face crying, and say "you asked for this, you asked for this and now you're not going to eat it!"

The next dream I have, I'm super excited as I stand outside looking at a building. I go on to enter the building and as I walk through, I see a police officer who is watching something on TV but he looks extremely sad as he watches. My heart was troubled as I saw the sadness on his face, so I asked him directly, "what's wrong?" The officer then responds by saying, "It's You. I'm trying to prove you're innocent!"

I couldn't forget those dreams, and when I awoke the next morning and began my daily routine of prayer, meditation, and writing down the things in which I saw and heard while in my dream state, I knew I had just received the message I had prayed so earnestly for prior to falling asleep while my heart was in agonizing pain. I prayed and meditated asking God for the meaning of everything. While meditating the bible verse John 4:34 came to me, which states, "my food is to do the will of Him who sent me, and to finish His work." I had dreamt about it and it didn't take long for me to receive those answers. I'd always asked God to use me for purposes bigger than myself and I had always told God that I would walk accordingly and for him to use me how he sees fit. In that first dream God was letting me know that, he was doing just that, using me for something bigger than myself. I was the young boy who had asked for the food and God was me, who had given the food. When I, the young boy, was throwing the food away, God shunned me by hitting me and saying that I asked for this and now I'm throwing it away by not eating. My mind was blown away at how clear it was all shown to me. How easily I could understand and interpret the message in the dream, then I thought about it and said, "I asked for that too."

The second dream I had that night was so clear it could not be denied. I spoke to an angel of God wearing a police officer's uniform who, when I asked "why he was so sad"? he clearly stated "It's YOU, I'm trying to prove You're Innocent!" At the time I was so close to giving up all hope in my innocence and freedom but my pleading guilty was not what God wanted me to do. I was trying to get out of there prematurely when he had something bigger for me to do. I just had to endure, I had to persevere, and I had to keep fighting. I had to keep going and he was proving my innocence. All I had to do was, be still, God would fight for me, just as Exodus 14:14 states. If I had plead guilty there would be no way God could prove I was completely innocent. This was the path HE had set me on. This was God's will for me, and after seeing and hearing those things in my dreams, I knew I could not plead guilty. I would not plead guilty. I knew that was not the way for me to go and I knew from that day on, anything outside of Innocence was not an option. I was once again

full of faith and hope. And just when doubts filled my mind, God's comfort gave me renewed hope and cheer. Psalms 94:19

Days later my lawyer came back to see me and I couldn't believe he had come back so fast. It usually took him weeks to return but I knew the only reason he came to visit me three days later was because I told him I would enter a plea of guilt. When I was brought into the interrogation room, I was astonished at all of the people with him on the other side of the bars and bulletproof glass. Usually FengPi was only accompanied by his translator but this time when he arrived, he had his translator along with three prosecutors, two judges, multiple officers, and other Chinese people that I had never seen before. My lawyer and his translator had all these new people with them and they were all in a great mood, smiling, laughing, and talking. I believed they were talking about me and the translator was extremely happy while explaining the process of me signing my life away.

One of the prosecutors quickly had the papers for me to plead guilty handed over expecting me to sign, until I informed the entire group that I would not be signing anything that says I'm guilty nor did I have any intentions to ever do so. When I said this, it seemed as if everyone in the room understood English perfectly because where everybody just seconds prior was jolly and lively, they all just looked at me with great hatred in their eyes. The translator in her anger screams "you said you were going to plead guilty and you know we have everything ready for you to do it." She then yells, "why did you lie?" "Why did you waste all of our time?" In front of the many people present to watch me sign the plea agreement I replied, "Yes I know I said that but after much thought and prayer, I decided I'm not pleading guilty." The translator with her eyes bulging out of her head then yells, "all the evidence points against you! You will never go home if you don't plead guilty!" I respond, "I've done absolutely nothing wrong, so I shouldn't have to plead guilty. I'm innocent so I'm not going to say I'm guilty." My words were translated for the group and this upset everyone even more. Though the meeting ended precipitously with me not signing anything, the attempts to convince and corner me to plead guilty continued.

I never stopped calling my lawyer to try to figure out what was going on with my case. Calling two or even three times a week. I continued to wait for him so I could get more of my questions answered. Mainly when I would be free and now when I would at least be going to trial. I felt there were many reasons for my lawyer to come see and talk to me but he felt otherwise. I knew I couldn't trust him and even if I had attempted to, everything within my being wouldn't allow me to do so. My lawyer didn't care for me or care if I was innocent or guilty. He didn't care if I got 100 days or 100 years. He didn't care if I lived or died. Neither he nor his translator cared and I'd told the American embassy how I felt many times when they came to see me but I couldn't tell them exactly why I didn't trust him. I wanted to express the real reasons for my distaste but not only was I not allowed to speak about my case or what was going on within the jail, I didn't want to say too much. If I was to tell my government what was going on inside, while I still resided there, it would only make my situation worse. I couldn't tell them that other inmates had access to my lawyer's phone number. I couldn't tell them my lawyer was coming to visit other cellmates of mine. I couldn't tell them I was being yelled at and berated by my lawyer, his translator, and every other officer or Chinese official that I came in contact with. I couldn't

tell them how I'd been assaulted and forced to sign things. I couldn't tell them, they had been trying to force me to plead guilty each time they saw me. I couldn't tell them my life was being threatened every day within my cell. I just couldn't say anything because I knew, afterwards I would be treated even worse.

Representatives from the American Consulate General only came to visit me once a month and those visits only lasted 15 minutes. That would give me another 43,500 minutes before I saw them again. It was too much time to try to stay alive until someone who cared saw me again. I wanted to run into the least number of complications while within a prison system where because of my color and country, I'm lower than the pigs they kill to feed the inmates. I didn't want to make it harder on myself and I refused to be the reason my time was more difficult than it already was. Whenever the embassy came to visit, I did continuously tell them I didn't trust my lawyer and I wanted them to also relay that message to my family. I wanted everyone who saw and spoke to me to know, I didn't trust him at all. I told my government officials that I refused to put my future in his hands, and I would never listen to him. I said everything I could within the rules. I said everything outside of "they want to kill me in here! My lawyer's lying to me! He wants me to spend life behind bars! Here's how I know!"

I'm walking through a school building and I enter a cafeteria. While I walk through the cafeteria, many people are passing and speaking to me. I verbally respond to some and others I nod my head at until I stop to speak to a few people who are sitting down at a table. Some are eating, some are just talking, but as I stand there a woman taps me on the shoulder and begins to talk to me. She says "Tell her everything, she will help you" then walks away. When the woman leaves my presence another woman in a red dress approaches me and we both sit down at a table and begin to talk. I then wake up and know I've been dreaming but I wonder what exactly this dream means.

I start my routine and go about my day as I normally would until I am called out of the cell. I had no idea who was coming to visit me, if it was the embassy, my lawyer, or Chinese government officials but I was always ready to leave the cell whenever I was allowed to. When I arrived at the room where the interviews and interrogations were held, there was a Chinese woman there and she instantly began to speak to the officers who brought me to the room. After I sat and was cuffed to the desk, I was given papers to sign. It was then when the woman grabbed the papers, I noticed she wasn't my lawyer's translator, as I thought she was. I was so happy and I thanked God it wasn't her. The officer exits the room and the woman begins to speak to me in fluent English. I get even happier when she tells me that she is my new lawyer. She informed me that my family and friends had found and sent her to me. The only thing I could think of is the dream I had the night before and hearing the words "tell her everything, she will help you."

My new lawyer introduces herself to me then says she really wants to help me. I'm told the papers I signed were for her to not only represent me but for her to do so pro bono. Her name is TianShi and she expressed that my family had raised money to help me but they had already paid two lawyers a total of \$45,000 with no communication or results. I thanked her for having it in her heart to want to assist me and my family. I also expressed

how dissatisfied I was with my other lawyer. She responded that he will still be my lawyer but she will lead the efforts and he will be assisting her with my case. TianShi then informed me that she had made attempts to visit me every day for the past three days but the jail wouldn't allow her to see me. That led to her asking if I was ok or if I had gotten into any trouble within the prison. "No", I responded, "I haven't been in any trouble and nothing too crazy has happened to me recently". She then responded "Are you sure? Are you positive there was nothing happening inside here that I, your family, and the American government should know about?"

"Yes, I'm positive". I wanted to tell my new lawyer everything that was happening within the prison from being physically and verbally abused while being forced to sign paperwork to inmates having access to my lawyer to threats on my life and witnessing death but I said everything had been ok. "I'm going to help you" she stated, "and I've read over the case notes and saw the video but there are many things that don't add up to me so I just need you to describe the entire situation".

I got excited when she said things weren't adding up to her because I'd been confused on why exactly I was being held without bail and no knowledge of what I was being charged with for nearly 9 months now. I began by describing everything about the night that led to my imprisonment from the moment I finished eating at the restaurant after officiating the football game, all the way up to the moment I arrived at the bar for the second time. I described how I was assaulted by random civilians and the officers who arrested me. When I finished describing the altercation, I told my lawyer TianShi that I was only defending myself because I was attacked by multiple people. "I'm innocent" I exclaimed, and "My life has been in constant danger since that night and I've done nothing wrong, I don't understand why I'm being held captive. This just isn't right." The words she uttered next changed my life and I'll never forget them. "No, this isn't right, and I totally agree with you," Lawyer TianShi said, "I believe you and I'm going to defend you as innocent by self-defense."

I was so ecstatic 'because this was the first time I heard these words come from someone's mouth that wasn't my own. I knew the representatives from the American Embassy believed this, but we were never allowed to talk about my case, so none of us could actually say or write the word "innocent" during their monthly visit. I thought about everything lawyer FengPi and his translator had been telling me. Hearing "you're wrong, you're guilty, all the evidence is against you, you're never going home" being yelled anytime I received a visit had been taking a toll on me but I now had real representation in a lawyer that was serious about helping me. A lawyer that was truly going to speak on my behalf. A lawyer that believed I should be free. I was excited because with TianShi taking my case, I knew I would really be free soon.

I knew the pain and all the turmoil I was experiencing would soon come to an end. I didn't know when my court date was just yet but whenever it would be held, I felt confident that the truth would lead me where I wanted to be; Free. Finally, I wasn't the only one who knew I was innocent, my new lawyer also knew. Everything in me believed my Lawyer TianShi was a godsend. I was told she had been sent to help me and I believed what I heard

now, more than ever before. I would do exactly what I was told to do in my dream, I would “tell her everything.”

Chapter Thirteen

NOTHING BUT THE TRUTH

If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor.

-Desmond Tutu

Both my lawyers finally came together to meet with me and because my new lawyer TianShi speaks fluent English, there was no longer a need for FengPi’s translator to be present. I was asked for the thousandth time in the past year to explain the entire incident and I was able to fully express myself about how I wanted to be defended. Both TianShi and FengPi knew exactly how I felt about my case and how I expected to be defended, but now for the first time, there were 2 people present who were on the side of innocence opposed to 2 on the side of guilt as it had been for nearly a year. It was good to feel like things were finally going in the right direction as I was not being asked to plead guilty 60 times a meeting. Lawyer FengPi didn’t have much to say during this visit, he sat quietly but sporadically would lean over to Lawyer TianShi and whisper in her ear asking questions or giving input. The full meeting for the most part consisted of TianShi and myself having full, open, and constant dialogue.

FengPi never told me when I would go to court and as TianShi looked at the case notes she often repeated “This is not right! This is not right!” I grew concerned because I wanted to know why she was so worried as she read over the case notes. “This file is missing some things”, she replied. I couldn’t help but ask what was missing from the case notes and TianShi told me there were many things that we should possess but had not been included in the file. My lawyers then have a short conversation amongst themselves after which I am told FengPi had the file in his possession for months yet TianShi had no access to the missing items, and she didn’t know why, nor where they might be. The main thing that concerned her was, she had been told by both my other lawyer and my attacker’s lawyer that one of the men who attacked me was injured and had an eye completely removed. The doctor’s notes, medical exam, and medical history and records of both men were completely missing from the case file. I was surprised to hear these things were missing, not only because they may have been the single most important piece of information gathered but because FengPi told me many times that he had not only seen these medical notes and records but he had even accompanied one of my attackers and his lawyer to a doctor’s

appointment. FengPi had been lying and tried to deceive me the entire time. That had only given me another reason to not put any of my trust in him.

TianShi came to visit more frequently than FengPi as we prepared for court but none of us knew exactly when that date would be. Each time TianShi asked me to walk her through exactly what was happening the night I was arrested, she emphasized a different part of the incident. She wanted to know what I was seeing, hearing, and feeling at the time of the attack. To help her gain a better understanding of my surroundings while the altercation was taking place, she visited the bar wherein I had been attacked as well. For me to witness her looking at the case file in front of me, visiting me often, constantly asking about the incident to get a better feel for the situation, and more importantly, keeping an open line of communication with my family made me feel like I had the perfect lawyer. In a few weeks time, TianShi had already done much more than any of my previous lawyers had done. We began to discuss a hospital visit because it was said my attackers went to emergency in order to get their injuries tended to. My lawyer planned to visit the doctors who were on duty that evening to speak to them about the injuries of the men but when she arrived at the hospital the doctors who were on duty that night didn't want to speak with her.

TianShi believed going to the police station to speak to the arresting officers would be a good idea, to gain a better understanding of the night in which I was detained. When TianShi arrived, she waited for nearly an hour before she was not allowed to speak to the officers who'd arrested me completely and was aggressively told to leave the premises. Her mind began to wonder why those involved with my case were not being so forthcoming with information and some even completely unwilling to talk. She knew something more was happening that we all were unaware of. Still unable to locate medical records of the other 2 men involved in the altercation, TianShi again asked Lawyer FengPi, the prosecutors, and the judges over the case, why were the medical records missing from the file? She persisted to ask where they were and how could the judges deny me bail and hold me in jail for a year without charging me with any crime. This was being done without a record of any harm being done to anyone as well. She asked the prosecutors and the judges, "Why is my client still incarcerated?" But No one would answer her questions. While one of my lawyers had an open door policy with the prosecutors and judges, communicating often and freely, the other had none. No one employed within the Chinese government would return a call, email, or even speak to Lawyer TianShi.

Soon my lawyer wanted to speak to those who witnessed the altercation as she noticed though their statements were taken, their personal and contact information was not recorded in the file either. This confirmed the uneasy feeling TianShi had about something being awfully wrong with the entire process. Hearing this only delighted me because I knew the truth was being hidden and my lawyer was seeing it also. I could tell her belief in my innocence was growing and she was working to ensure the judges saw it also.

On her next visit, Lawyer TianShi told me the court date would be set for the following week, but she hadn't been given the exact date just yet. Though it seemed normal to her, it was terribly odd to me that the judges knew we would attend court a week later

but did not tell us exactly when. Despite everything, we now began to prepare for how my day at court would go. Though I had 2 lawyers, it was Lawyer TianShi that wanted to go over what I would say when I got the opportunity to speak and as my court date drew closer, there were so many things that baffled me. First, the judges and Chinese government knew my lawyer had just taken my case less than a month prior yet that was all the time she would be given to prepare for my defense. Second, were how many things she found out and accomplished in that short period of time she had been preparing daily. The third, happened after being called to an interrogation room. Three people in robes and 2 in police uniform stood on the other side of the bars and bulletproof glass. One of the robed Chinese people who were judges spoke and one of the officers translated what was being said into English. I was told to sign and put my fingerprints on each page of a 7 page packet. There were 3 different packets all separated by a single staple. I couldn't read the Chinese version but finally an English copy was presented to me and on the front in huge letters it read, Indictment.

When I returned to my cell, I closely dissected the first and only thing about my case I'd received in English. As I read the indictment, I noticed so many things that were wrong according to the police record. I had been told by lawyer FengPi for nearly a full year that all the evidence gathered had been against me and proved my guilt. He told me multiple times that pleading guilty would grant me favor but while reading the indictment, I discovered my case had been transferred back from the prosecutor's office multiple times due to lack of evidence. Upon many other things, I also read both my attackers, in their sworn statement to police were quoted saying, they "wanted to hurt the big black man". I was appalled because I knew from the beginning that I was wrongfully arrested but reading the indictment only confirmed what I already knew. I was by law, an innocent man and should not have been held longer than 72 hours.

The facts I gathered weighed so heavy on my heart because I didn't know why they would blatantly leave an innocent man behind bars. How could those over my case watch the surveillance video and read the words of the other involved parties yet feel I am the one deserving of imprisonment? As I reflected on my time locked away, and the harm I'd avoided both the night that landed me in jail and while inside, it hurt. It stung every time I thought about the treatment I had been receiving by those in power but TianShi and myself continued to prepare.

It was 2 days until the biggest day of my life, almost time to prove my innocence, and I had never been more eager for anything, ever. Though I didn't know exactly how the day would be arranged, I knew I was finally going to get the opportunity to explain everything that occurred that night in detail. I would tell exactly how I felt, the things I saw and heard, everything. I would walk the judges through my experience in such a way that they would put themselves in my position. I would explain everything that came with being attacked by multiple men with weapons. They would get to see through my lens.

In preparing for my court date, I knew I had to look my best and that came with getting my hair cut. I'd avoided getting a haircut since my arrival when the clippers were brought to the cell. Every 3 or 4 weeks an officer would bring a small box that contained

clippers and electric razors inside our cell and the inmates would be groomed. Two people would grab the clippers without guards and lines would form as those 2 inmates began to cut everyone's hair, taking off as much hair as possible. There were three electric razors and as some stood to have their heads trimmed others began to clean their faces. Fingernail clippers were also passed around the cell. I had never gotten a jail haircut because I felt sharing these products that were not cleaned between each inmate was completely unsanitary. I knew I would never use the jail clippers when I saw a man inside my cell who had Aids not only using the same clippers as everyone else on his head but he also cut his pubic hair. Though it was a small thing it was huge at the same time. I had a small unkempt Afro and in order to get groomed for my court date I knew I had to get my own clippers. Though there were no mirrors, I imagined myself looking like Martin Lawrence when he played Shaquille Sunflower as I would often twist my hair in random areas of my head daily. Only those around me knew exactly how I looked, and because there were no mirrors inside my cell, I myself didn't know. I could only laugh at how I thought I looked. I asked the officer who brought the clippers to the cell if I could purchase my own clippers but I was told no and to use the clippers that we within my cell had been presented with.

With a fresh bald head and a thick beard, I had to do more to prepare for my court date than just what I'd been doing with my lawyers. I started to get deeper into prayer and meditation because I wanted to make sure I was thinking, doing, and saying the right things. I thought of key figures in the bible like Moses, Daniel, Paul, and even The Messiah who had restored and strengthened their intimacy with God through fasting and prayer. In my attempt to be as close to God as possible, I too decided to fast. Not only was I asking God to protect me and grow me closer to Him, I also asked God to touch my mind and my mouth. To strengthen my heart that I may receive his spirit and allow him to speak through me as I would finally get a chance to speak for myself and plead my case. I asked God to put his words in my mind, in my heart, and allow his words to flow through me. I knew God would do everything he said he would do and everything I asked him to. I just wanted him to know the same about me. I knew it was going to be a great day for me. I knew I would receive an innocent verdict. I knew I would be freed.

The day had finally arrived. I'd waited nearly a full year and it was now the morning of the biggest day of my life. I woke up to do my daily routine just like every other morning but it felt absolutely nothing like other mornings. I woke up and brushed my teeth, but I didn't have the stomach to eat the prepared breakfast. I knew exactly what I would wear since I found out what day I would go to court. I didn't possess a suit, any dress shirts, or even a pair of shoes, so I put on the best clothes I had. My family sent things for my birthday and I wore a black hooded sweatshirt with the word "Blessed" in bold letters on it, black sweatpants, and the only shoes I had; orange shower shoes. I'd been wearing them since they took the shoes I arrived in. The jail confiscated everyone's shoes upon arrival and they had to special order those flip flops for me because there were none in a size 12.5 at the facility. Since I had no intention of ever returning to that cell again, I took the most important things I possessed with me. I only felt my bible, my letters, and my pictures from family and friends were worth keeping and they filled the inside of my hoodie pocket.

My prayer and meditation session felt extremely different this morning as I prepared myself for what I was to say, how I was to say it, and to hear the judge tell me I was innocent. I felt great, I felt thankful, and I felt extremely blessed for the day to have finally arrived. I had a lawyer who was prepared to defend me in the right way and according to the indictment we both felt I should be walking away from the courtroom without any hand restraints. I was beyond ready to leave jail as it had been the longest year of my life. And finally, I would be given the opportunity to let people know exactly what happened the night I was thrown behind bars. Finally, the truth would be heard.

There was a huge knocking on the steel door outside of the cell and as the bars on the inner cell begin to open, everyone stops as the officers outside start to scream. When I received and signed off on my indictment, I also signed on a paper which stated the exact date and time I was set to appear in court, so I already had an idea of who the officers were yelling for and what they were saying. Everyone in the cell turns around to look at me but I'm already walking towards the front of the cell. I had been sitting and waiting months for what was to happen next. I was handcuffed by one of the 6 officers who were at the entrance of the cell and I quickly noticed that I recognized only 1 of them from the facility. After my wrists are put into the tight restraints and my arms are behind my back, I am then escorted through the building until I reach the front of the facility. I hadn't seen the entrance and outside of the facility in many moons and the morning sunlight made it look extremely different, more vibrant with much grass, many trees, many animals, and less bars, and less inmates.

A police van is waiting with its rear hatch already ajar. After being put in the back of the van, all 5 officers who were not from the facility entered also. This van differed from the first police van I rode in, this one had the seats facing each other in the back with the leg space open in the middle, and a cage separating the front seat. Two of the officers entered the van by the driver and passenger doors while the remaining 3 officers sat in the back with me, one next to me to my left, and the other 2 sat across from me. It was a long ride to the courthouse but I somehow enjoyed every second of it. The officers didn't speak a word and being able to be outside for the first time in a year was a special feeling. I never knew seeing cars driving on the road, streetlights, restaurants and stores could excite me so much. After smelling shit 24 hours a day, the smell of gasoline, delicious food, fresh cut grass, and even the officer's cologne was a small piece of heaven. I was watching people walk around who weren't wearing a police uniform or the jail jersey everyone was forced to wear all day, and it did something beautiful to my spirit. I almost felt free, that is until I tried to freely move my hands and arms. As we pulled up to the courthouse and I saw the stairs and entrance to the front doors, I got even more excited because I pictured myself standing atop those same stairs in front of the building that I was passing, with my hands raised, like *Rocky*. Victoriously.

We drove through the parking structure underneath the building and after parking I was pulled out of the van and walked up a flight of stairs. One officer has my right arm as we walk and because his pace is a lot faster than mine, I begin to stumble up the stairs. I am much heavier than the officer holding my arm so he is unable to help me catch my balance so he releases my arm and my stumbling turns into falling. I am incapable of catching

myself with my arms because they are tied behind my back and my face catches all the force and weight behind me as it hits the stairs with my shoes tumbling down.

When we reached the next level, I was taken to an area where I would be kept until I was set to appear before the judge. It was an area with many holding cells and still handcuffed but now with my arms in front of me, I was locked inside one. My face is still in great pain from the impact of the fall so I massage it until an officer comes back to the cell 20 minutes later and throws a small clear plastic bag with 2 sweet rolls inside the cell. After the first bite I felt I still had no appetite, so I sat there and read my bible before getting into prayer and meditation. I tried to quiet my mind but I was thinking of so many things as I sat there waiting. I looked down at the shiny silver bracelets I wore and didn't know exactly what was going to happen next, and since there were no clocks around, I didn't know when it would happen either. I was ready to present my case, and I was extremely nervous. I had first kickoff of the game butterflies in my belly, but I was also confident that everything would be OK.

The holding cell is unlocked and I'm being walked by the police through the building to the courtroom. The closer I got to the doors of the courtroom, the faster my heart was beating and as the doors were pushed open, I was astounded to see how many people were in attendance. Not only did I not expect to have an open court date but I didn't expect to have so much support while in a foreign land. By corresponding with the American Consulate General, I knew my family had been restricted from flying into China for my court date yet the courtroom was packed to capacity, with people from all around the world. There was so much support from the expat community who were staying or working in China. Even Chinese nationals whom I had met or grown close to in my short time traveling around the country were present. Though I walked in wearing a very serious look on my face, my heart was smiling. To have the love and support of so many during my toughest time meant everything to me and though I tried to keep an even, emotionless look on my face, I couldn't help but smile as I made eye contact with many people while en route to where I would sit during the hearing. Their love and support in a matter of seconds had strengthened me and the feeling that I will soon be freed instantly gained momentum. I so greatly missed seeing and spending time with my friends who had come to support me, and knowing how patriotic Chinese citizens are, seeing some of the young Chinese guys who I coached there to support was surprising. But what surprised me most was there was no jury of my peers.

I quickly notice the 3 Representatives from the American Embassy sitting in the front row as I'm led to a chair that's within a small wooden gated area. I hoped my handcuffs would be taken off for the court proceedings but I was hoping for too much and I sat down before the door of the wooden gate enclosed me. There were 3 judges, 2 women and a man, sitting directly in front of me, and they were higher than ground level about 40 feet away. Just in front of them on ground level was the stenographer, to her right was the translator, and to the right of them, my left, was a television set. To the right of me were my 2 lawyers, and they sat, talking quietly while reviewing papers inside a manila folder. To my left were the opposition, 2 Chinese prosecutors, a woman I had met previously who had been extremely rude to me when she visited the jail and forced me to sign paperwork and a

younger looking man. When I looked over to the prosecution's side, the young man and myself locked eyes and he then blew his cheeks up with air and crossed his eyes. I'm appalled because I can't believe I'm on trial for my life and one of the prosecutors is making funny faces at me. I now knew he looked young because he in fact was young and I couldn't believe the audacity of the racist child.

The proceedings start and I direct my attention in front of me to the judges as everyone in the courtroom is told to stand. One of the three judges who were also all standing up front along with the translator, came to see me nearly every month prior to this date with the American Embassy on their visits. I was told by the representatives of the Embassy that they had never seen or heard of a judge visiting a man being detained, especially every month. This caused them to be confused as to why I was being visited but not released. Over the speaker, I hear one of the judges start to speak and afterwards everything said is translated over the speaker as well. Everything said in the court proceedings was to be translated.

"Everyone can be seated. We have Accuser Pei Chen vs Defendant Wendell Lee Brown."

I am asked to explain in detail the full incident that led to my arrest. I started from the beginning, from walking in the bar with my friend from New York and sitting in our own section to dodging beer bottles and knives as I was attacked by 2 random men and everyone walking away. I explained arriving a second time only to be attacked a second time. I tried not to miss anything, as I explained what I was thinking and even the fear I felt in those moments. That was the first time, the judges, one of the prosecutors, and everyone in attendance had heard the events from my own mouth.

One of the prosecutors began to yell, and her words were translated to "what are you doing here, in China?" "I was traveling," I responded. "I had been invited here and used my travel visa to travel around China. I had been doing so for about a year, just enjoying the country". I was indeed doing more than traveling and those who invited me and signed my visa may also have been held accountable for not only getting me an apartment but also paying me each month. I decided not to mention those men nor the things they were doing that went against the Chinese law. It was after this that things started to escalate, as exchanges between my lawyer and the persecution began to take place. Anytime TianShi would start to speak, the woman prosecutor kept interrupting her, talking over her and even yelling at her. I couldn't believe there were 3 judges yet none had control over the courtroom and were allowing that to take place. There were many things said that didn't make it into translation but seeing TianShi speak on my behalf, watching the emotion and passion in which she spoke when it came to defending me, showed that she truly cared and wanted my unjust punishment to end. I heard so many things that I didn't know happened, and I was extremely thankful to have heard them at all.

Lawyer FengPi for the first time starts to speak. He asked me what countries I had traveled to or worked in and I began to name all the countries I had been to and the things I had done within them. He asked, had I ever been in any legal trouble in any of those countries including my own, to which I responded by saying No. He then asked if I had any

children. “Yes”, I stated as my voice began to tremble and tears began to fall. “Yes, I have a 10-year-old son, who I miss every day and He’s being forced to grow up and live without his father and I don’t know why.” More tears flow as I drop my head, “it just isn’t right”, I conclude.

The video of the incident is now about to be played and by this being my first time seeing the footage, I was eager to see if everything transpired just as I remembered. As the video starts, I see myself standing alone while people walk past me, then I’m pushed down stairs. A bottle is thrown, a knife is taken out and a man tries to stab me in the face. I sat there completely stunned as I watched the surveillance video for the first time. I initially couldn’t believe how fast everything had transpired but I more importantly can’t believe that, after everything I just watched on video, I’m the person who has been locked away for nearly a year. My mind is utterly blown. I wanted to watch the video again because I was still in disbelief of what had me handcuffed and not allowed to roam about the world freely. I thought the video would be dissected in front of the entire courtroom. I assumed it would be watched 50 times, rewinded, paused, played, but after the video played only once, it wasn’t played again and the tv was turned off.

The prosecution begins to read statements from the night of the incident. They start with those of my attackers and they state, one of them went to the bathroom and when he came back, I was standing in his way so he pushed me. The other man said he came to help his friend. Both of the Chinese men were quoted saying they wanted to “hurt the big black man”. More statements are read but these were from some of the witnesses that night. The statements of three people would be used as evidence and all of which said that I had been in the wrong and that I, the lone black person surrounded by Chinese citizens, had done harm to two Chinese men for no reason at all. One of the people whose statement was used gave a totally different account of what the video showed yet their words were still counted as evidence.

My lawyer TianShi then presented photographs and asked if she could show a recording of exactly what the inside of the bar looked like, where I was standing when everything happened, the distance that I stumbled from after being pushed down the stairs and even the view angle of the witnesses that testimonies had been used. The judges allowed the video to be played and the video my lawyer showed proved the witnesses who said they saw everything, in fact would not have been able to see anything due to pillars and other things obstructing their view. The prosecution then objected to the video saying it didn’t show the real effects of the evening and it shouldn’t be used. The prosecutor’s reason for objecting to the video was nonsense to me as the only thing missing from the video recorded by my lawyer was people to obstruct the view of their witnesses even more and furthermore discredit their words. Ultimately my lawyer’s videos would not be admitted into evidence.

Minutes later, a girl was being spoken about by the prosecution. This girl who was present at the bar that night with friends, was hit in the head with a bottle that was thrown at me and sent to the hospital to get stitches for her wound. She told police the next day after going to the police station with a wrap on her head that she saw me in the bar

standing alone, before being approached and attacked by two men. Her statement, though it was read for the court, would not be admitted into evidence. I knew when the only witness who spoke of my innocence, words were not accepted, that the whole trial was to make me look as if I was walking through the bar attacking people.

I initially felt the prosecutor who previously came to the jail for me to sign papers had a problem with me, but when she never referred to me as Mr. Brown, the defendant, or even the accused but instead, she used the black man, when she spoke about or to me, I knew she wasn't too fond of me. In one instance she said to the entire courtroom, "Look at him, he looks like he wants to hurt people. He looks guilty". I didn't quite understand what that comment meant. Did I look like I wanted to hurt people because I didn't have a smile on my face, because I had muscles, or was it simply because I looked like what she had called me the entire time? I sat there, in her eyes looking guilty and like I wanted to hurt people because I was a "black man". More of the prosecutor's words were translated and she proceeded to say, "I know that night, the black man wanted to hurt those 2 chinese men".

The prosecutor's words continue to stun me but she was just beginning. She continued to speak and said

"This big black man that has hurt our citizens, deserves the maximum sentence."

When these words were translated to English, my heart stopped just as my mouth hit the floor. I didn't understand why the prosecutor would say this. How did I deserve the maximum amount of time in prison? The prosecution then states, because I didn't confess to a crime, I didn't agree to pay my attackers, nor did I plead guilty, I deserved the maximum amount of time in prison. I couldn't believe what I was hearing. I, of everyone who was involved in the incident, deserved the max amount of years. My heart, now beating overtime at the thought of the maximum number of years? I didn't know what the max was but I knew it was longer than I had already been locked up and I couldn't do another day. How could I deserved the maximum amount of time, despite what the video had just shown, despite the words of the young lady who was sent to the hospital with a head injury, and despite the words of my attackers who actually tell police they not only assault me, by putting their hands on me first but that they wanted to hurt the "big black man". It's the man who is being attacked, opposed to the 2 men who are actually hurting people, who deserves a maximum imprisonment sentence. I am simply astonished by the logic.

None of the things that would help me were admitted into evidence. They didn't use the footage that Lawyer TianShi recorded of the landscape of the bar nor did they use the testimony of the young lady who was hit in the head with a beer bottle. It was recorded that over a dozen people showed up to the police station to give statements on my behalf. Some of these people were not allowed access to police or to speak to anyone and the few who were warranted permission to speak, their statements were not counted as valid. The police and prosecution didn't use the testimonies of the true witnesses of the altercation in the bar that night because their testimonies spoke of my innocence rather than guilt.

While yelling to speak over to my lawyer, the prosecution then pulled out a clear bag filled with clothes. It was the clothing that I'd worn that night and this was my first time seeing the shirt and pants since I was forced to take them off at the police station. The prosecution then says all my clothes were stained with the blood of one of my attackers. I knew this was a false statement when spoken because not only were the clothes not taken out of the clear bag to show everyone present the blood on them but I wore those clothes for hours after I was attacked, going to the bathroom, looking in mirrors multiple times, and I had been around and socialized with multiple people after having being attacked. No one including myself saw any blood on any article of clothing I had been dressed in. As I reflected on when I was forced to take those clothes off at the precinct, I was never told nor shown that there was blood on me either, I was just told to take everything off. Another false accusation with no true evidence from the prosecution to try to pin guilt on the "big black man", but at this point, after listening to the prosecutor, nothing surprised me anymore. Their minds were convinced that I was guilty of wrongdoing from the moment they heard I was a foreigner and even more so when they saw me. The words "he looks guilty" kept replaying in my mind. I started to think how could someone look guilty and what did I need to do so I no longer looked guilty?

Things get even more interesting when the medical records, examination and doctors' statements that for nearly a year had been missing with no explanation as to why or where, were presented by the prosecution. "The black man knocked YuPei Chen's eye out and there was nothing the doctors could do to save it. He could have possibly died." One of the prosecutors exclaimed, then both the prosecutors' bodies perked up in their chairs with amusement in their eyes as an officer handed the file over to my lawyers. How could they just now present these notes, I thought? That has to be against the law. Both my lawyers began to pour over the file, reading as fast as they could trying to gather as much information as possible from the notes. Since FengPi lied about these same notes, this was both of my lawyers' first time seeing the file. As they both share the file, I can't help but want to tell FengPi to move aside so the person who actually wants to defend me can see what she needs to do her job. The judge asks my lawyer if they have anything to say concerning the file but both are still head down reading pages in the file. I raise my hand,

"I have to use the restroom, may I please go?"

The judge calls for a quick 10-minute recess and 2 officers escort me out the courtroom. My lawyers are doing exactly what I thought they would, they dig even deeper into the file, reading the exam notes and statements to find out why these things were kept hidden from us the entire time of my confinement. Ling, who had come to see and support me, meets me in the hall on my way to the restroom and with tears in her eyes she beelines towards me. One of the officers walking me in that direction then steps in between us and moves her aside, not allowing her to touch me. "Everything is ok, don't worry", I say to her and as I'm using the restroom, thinking of the encounter I just had with her, I'm reminded of our last encounter and how I had uttered those exact words. This ending would be different though, *I won't be wearing these cuffs much longer*, I thought to myself. I also reflected on all the smiling faces, love, and positive energy that was there. But, I couldn't help but wonder if the 2 men who were responsible for my current predicament were present at the

trial. I tried to remember what they looked like but couldn't. I wouldn't be able to recognize the 2 of them if they were standing in front of me unless they stood armed with weapons again. But, I still wanted to know if they had come and if they were there just to laugh at my pain.

I re-entered the courtroom.

"We will resume court!" the judge echoed,

I've been seated again and the judges are looking towards my lawyers to rebuttal the file that they had just received. TianShi begins to ask questions to the prosecution. "When did these examinations take place? Where did they take place? Were there any follow up examinations? Why didn't the physician give a full statement, other than these few sentences?" The prosecution starts to answer but gets angry while doing so. "These questions make no sense!" The prosecutor states, "Everything has been given to them! The answer to every question she has asked is right there in the file!" I couldn't believe simple questions couldn't get answered when I believed our sole reason for being in court was to prove my innocence and in order to do that, we needed to get these questions answered. TianShi, keeping her voice calm and steady the entire time, asked a few more questions and these were the most important of them all, "Why does the hospital in the indictment differ from the hospital in this file? The doctor says there was something small in the eye of YuPei Chen but it doesn't say what it was. Do you know what was supposed to have been in his eye? Why doesn't the doctor specify exactly what was wrong? Where did this file come from? Why is it that my first time seeing this file was just 10 minutes ago? You said with your own mouth that YuPei Chen has lost an eye, why is there no record of this surgery?"

I thanked God for my lawyer once again. Watching her fight for me and my life was an amazing sight. I had never been so happy to hear these questions, because these were some of the same ones I'd previously thought of. I had been hearing about some of these things prior to my court date but I'd never believed them and now my lawyer got a chance to ask the questions I wanted to know the answer to. She asked some questions that I had yet to even think of. TianShi would say a few more words. This was the first time I had heard them from her or anyone else. "My client was standing in a bar enjoying himself, until he was attacked. The 2 men who initiated the physical attack then armed themselves with weapons to which my client, in fear for his life, was forced to defend himself before walking away. My client was forced to defend himself. He is innocent by self-defense."

I am soon asked if I have anything to say. I knew this moment would come and I'd been thinking of what I would say from the second I found out I finally had a court date. I thought of everything I'd been through in the past year, the abuse, the mental anguish, and after sitting and listening in court, the complete injustice. A storm of emotions ran through me, and all the things I had previously thought to say was a mere afterthought.

Turning my head around to look at those present, "I would like to thank my family", I started.

“Turn around and speak to us!” One of the judges quickly exclaims.

“My apologies.” I responded, “But I do want to thank my family, all my family who are present here today and those who weren’t able to make it for various reasons. I truly do appreciate your love and support right now as it has been the difference between life and death for me. I call you all my family because when we go through our toughest times it is always family who you can rely on. It is family who never gives up on you and continues to stand by you. Thank you for standing by me. Thank you for never leaving me. I would like to thank the representatives from the American embassy who consistently intercede for me and have done everything they can to try to ease this pain. Thank you to my lawyers, who have been speaking for me and doing everything possible to get this matter resolved in the correct manner. And I want to thank you, I thank you 3 judges for hearing my case. I pray that you can see what I saw, and feel how I felt, being attacked by multiple men who pick up things with the sole intention of harming me, though I had done nothing to provoke them. I pray the right decision will be made so I can get back to my family and back to living my life.”

After a few more words my Lawyer TianShi, the prosecutor, then 2 of the 3 judges. I hear,

“Court adjourned”

Sitting within that small box, dismayed, with no idea as to what’s happening. I’m escorted outside the courtroom, past my lawyers without being allowed to speak to them. How could court possibly be adjourned already? The judges haven’t called my attackers in so my lawyers can question them, nor have the judges told me I’m innocent. I am innocent!

I’m taken to another room within the courthouse for about 30 minutes before being transported back to the jail. As I sat while 3 police officers stood over me, the representatives from the American embassy who had come to the trial were brought inside. Just as I received a visit from them within the jail each month, this month my monthly visit would take place at the courthouse. The first question I asked was “why didn’t I receive a verdict today and when would I receive one?” Those from the embassy informed me that judges in China never rendered same day verdicts at court dates. When I heard this, I was a bit distraught because I was under the impression that I would be leaving that day. I believed I would be going home with an innocent verdict today but I was told everything had to be reviewed before they would reach a verdict.

“Did you hear the prosecutor say I looked like I wanted to hurt people and that I deserved the maximum sentence?” I asked my government officials. They said they didn’t understand what that meant either but we all knew exactly what it meant. I was frowned upon for one simple reason, I was a black man. I then asked a question I was dying to get the answer to, “if the judges agreed to give me the maximum amount of time like the prosecutors said I deserved, how long would it be before I could go home.” What the American Embassy said next left me in disbelief, “The crime you are being charged with is assault and it holds a maximum sentence term of 10 years.”

They couldn't possibly hold me hostage for 10 years, I thought. How could they when I've done nothing wrong! Everyone who came to the trial saw and heard everything that had taken place. "This is crazy, a full decade behind bars?!?", I exclaimed. My mind raced as I thought of the next time I would see my son if the prosecution had their way and I was sentenced to 10 years. My son would be the same age I was when he was born, 20. My baby could possibly have a family of his own the next time I saw him. How could I allow him to grow up like that? Making decisions and learning to be a man without me. My heart sank into my stomach. "Why didn't the judges admit all the things my lawyer brought for evidence. Why weren't the witnesses there to speak and be cross examined because a few of them had obviously lied? Why weren't my attackers there to be questioned?" I asked the Embassy these questions because I couldn't believe what was happening and I needed answers. And, the more I spoke, the more the Chinese officials who were present tried to silence me by stating "You are not allowed to discuss the case, any specific moments of the incident, nor today's court date."

I didn't understand the Chinese criminal court process at all, as there was so much about today's court proceedings that in my eyes was completely wrong. No collegiate criminal justice course I had previously taken could have prepared me for what I was experiencing. I had one more series of important questions that I had to ask my government officials. "How could I be told self-defense exists, yet those over my case watch me be attacked by men who are picking up weapons? How can they listen to my attackers tell the police they want to hurt me? How can those men be allowed to send an innocent woman to the hospital? How could all this happen and I be the one punished?! I don't understand what they want from me. What am I still doing wearing handcuffs? Why won't they let me go?" My chest tightened as I asked these questions and unfortunately, I knew my government officials couldn't give me the answers. "We honestly don't know", one of the embassy representatives responded, "and they won't exactly tell us why either but, we are asking them to judge you as you would be judged in America because you had no knowledge of the Chinese law." "But even according to the Chinese law, I'm innocent", I responded. "I just don't understand." then in unison the embassy representatives replied, "Sometimes we don't either."

I couldn't believe I was riding back to jail. That morning, I had taken everything I needed with me, my letters I received, my pictures of my family, my bible, everything of significance. I knew in my heart that I would never walk into another jail cell but I was on the way back there for another day or decade. I didn't know. But I did know I couldn't allow the Chinese government to get the best of me. I couldn't allow them to see me weak, or even go crazy. Initially I felt I would be home soon and at court I heard everything I needed to hear to give me even more hope and increase my faith that I would indeed be freed. I thought about the dream I had where I was told by God that He was trying to prove I'm innocent, and that is exactly what he was doing; proving my innocence. I knew everybody who had come to my trial, all my friends, the United States Consulate General, people whom I'd never met who sat there, just to listen and watch, all saw and heard the same things I did. And, we all knew, I was innocent.

Since I wasn't allowed to speak to my lawyers after court, the very next day Lawyer TianShi came to visit me. The first thing I wanted to do was ask when I would be free, but I had something more important to say to her. I wanted to thank her for everything she had done for me in the short amount of time since she had taken my case. I let her know I was completely amazed as I watched her in action and I commended her on everything she exposed at court. We went on to further discuss the previous day and what we both saw and heard. I let her know how surprised I was to find out those men had sent a woman to the hospital but I was more surprised at how rude and irrational the prosecutor was allowed to be without restraint from the judges. It didn't take long though before I asked the questions, I had been dying to know the answer to. When will I hear the words "Innocent", because I'd already been locked away too long. She told me with all honesty that she didn't know the exact date in which I would receive a verdict and be freed but she did tell me that it shouldn't be long and that we just had to wait.

The plan stayed the same, call both my lawyers twice every week to receive a visit and to be kept abreast of what's going on with the case. Being outside for the first time after nearly a year of 24-hour lockdown was like heaven opened up. It felt so good to be free even though it was for only a few seconds. Those visions stayed with me. The colors, the sounds, the smells, it was an amazing and unforgettable experience. Lawyer TianShi, who had been back and forth between China and America, had to go to America for business and family. She informed me that she would be leaving but would be back when I needed her. She also said she would stay on top of the judges to speed up the decision-making process so I could finally get back home. Her last words to me before her trip to America stuck in both my head and my heart. "No matter what happens or what they say while I'm gone, just don't plead guilty, because it isn't the truth".

I hadn't seen or heard from Lawyer FengPi since my court date and with TianShi now in America, I needed to be updated on what was happening outside with my family and more importantly my case. After asking one of the officers to call FengPi's number, he came back to the cell saying it no longer worked. I asked the officer if he tried to call a second time, thinking maybe he made an error while dialing, but the officer told me he did try a second and third time but the number was no longer in service. No matter how much I wanted to say "I can't believe he would change his number out of spite", I knew the truth. I could believe it and I wasn't even upset because I knew the type of man my lawyer was. Though he had been completely untrustworthy since the day we met, he was still my lawyer. He had been paid to represent me and still worked for me, so I wanted him to call and visit the judges to inquire about when his client would receive his innocent verdict.

When I couldn't get in touch with FengPi, I decided to hand the officer the number of FengPi's translator who accompanied him each time he visited. I planned to call the translator just as many times per week as I would call my lawyers to ensure she relayed the message. I needed him to come see expeditiously because the job wasn't done until I was free and at home. One day after asking the officers to contact the translator again, he came back to the cell with a message for me. FengPi's translator had told the officer that I should not call her phone worrying her about anything and I needed to stop calling all together. *How could these 2 people be so juvenile?* I had a lawyer who did not want to come see me and

who changed his number once I got a second lawyer to help assist him do the things that he failed to do since he'd been hired, and his translator who's telling me not to call. I'm waiting on a verdict while the one person I trust most is in another country and my lawyer along with his translator are avoiding me.

Chapter Fourteen

LOBSTER AND STEAK

Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable-if anything is excellent or praiseworthy-think about such things.

-Philippians 4:8

I'm walking through a building until I see a book resting on a dresser. It catches my attention because it is glowing so I walk towards the book as it continues to shine, and I touch it. Touching it sends a surge of light energy through my entire body and it makes me feel so good that I want more, so I open the book and begin to read and turn its pages. While turning the pages and skimming over its contents, I noticed there were names listed on the pages, and as I looked and read the names, I saw mine, clear as day, Wendell L. Brown Sr., bolded and highlighted. Then, I awoke.

When I woke up inside the prison, it was the middle of the night and I was the only one awake. My mind went back to one specific encounter in my life and it was that dream that took me there. I was told by an older woman that my name was in the bible and ever since that encounter I had been looking through the Bible to see if my name was indeed written within the great book. Though I had never found it in the physical Bible, I instantly began to believe that I was speaking to an angel of God that day when I was downtown Detroit. I'll never forget being told that but I soon realized the Bible she was speaking of was the book of life, The Bible that The Most High God reads, not our physical book here on earth. I now understood I was told that my name is written in the stars and the heavens. That dream where I read the names within that beautiful book with the glowing pages had just confirmed it. That message written on the rock for me to "Expect A Miracle" that I had been carrying around for all those years, was about to be fulfilled. My physical and spiritual freedom was the miracle I was to expect.

Being in such close proximity everyday with so many people who disliked me was extremely tough. As I learned more and more Chinese, I constantly heard my name and

many negative things were being said about me. Daily I'm hearing racist remarks and many threats being made on my life, but they were almost never said directly to me. It wasn't many inmates in my cell that disliked me, it was everyone and it was getting more difficult to stay peaceful both within me and outside of me with all the negativity around. I had to focus my mind even more to stay positive and not allow the words and threats of those I'm forced to share the cell with, hinder me nor bring me to a place where I would make a decision in a haste that would keep me imprisoned any longer than I've already been.

Daily I'm working to keep a sound mind, working to stay sane, working to stay out of trouble. Daily I had to shut out the things I heard and felt, but one day, I heard death threats being made while thinking about my situation and waiting for a verdict that has already taken a year too long to receive, and I got upset. I was tired of listening to people disrespect me while I meditated and as I tried to shut them out. I was tired of acting as if I couldn't understand what was being said, and one guy in particular who was spreading horrible lies about me, talking about everything he's going to do to me, and making ferocious threats, continued to upset me. He never stopped talking about how he was going to beat me to death and when I heard him say he's going to pour the boiling hot water that we are to drink on me, I couldn't take it any longer and I lost my cool. I'd become so irate that I began to feel my head and whole body heating up. I walked up to him and in Chinese, I told him to "come do it". As I stood in front of him, I grew even more furious and with my index finger I began to poke him in his face while speaking a mixture of both Chinese and English. He probably understood none of what I was saying but I knew he understood all of what I was saying at the same time. Not only was I ready for the physical altercation that was about to take place, but I welcomed it. This was not going to go well for him and whoever else was in arms reach, and It wasn't until I looked into his eyes and saw them bleeding with fear, did I stop poking and speaking to him. It was in that instant, that I began to feel sorry for him, because I knew he was just trying to be labeled as tough or cool by all the other inmates and all those things he had been previously speaking about doing to me were complete lies. He was terrified and everyone within our cell knew it.

One of the other inmates called the police over the intercom system within the cell and was told that I not only am verbally abusing the man but I am also physically assaulting him. When the bars to the cell open, eight officers dressed in protective body armor and helmets all while holding shields and batons, rush inside but when they notice the entire cell is calm and I'm in the back of the cell alone, one of the two officers not wearing protective gear sternly calls my name. When I approach him, he pushes me to the wall and handcuffs me.

Upon exit of the cell, I'm escorted to the right while the armored officers go left. I'm then taken into the office of the officer who handcuffed me where I am told to sit down. Usually, I am restrained and tied to the chair but not this time. The officer who speaks some English then begins to speak to me asking if everything is alright within the cell and what caused me to get so angry. I told him that I had been hearing threats on my life and with everything going on I was just frustrated, but I didn't fight the man. The officer tells me he knows I didn't fight him as he had already had other officers review the footage. He then asked me how the relationship is between myself and the other inmates, to which I

responded by saying “it's not bad, I don't run into any problems, besides today”. The officer then asked, “do you have any friends within the cell?” “No”, I responded, “and I don't think I'm ever going to make any. I'm not here to make friends” The officer understood why I responded that way but he then suggested that my time wouldn't be so hard on me mentally if I had someone I could talk to. And, he was right when he said this but I didn't have anyone there I could talk to. The only person inside my cell who spoke some English hated me more than the people who got me arrested so I only had God and myself. I already felt we were a greater 1-2 punch than Shaq and Kobe or Mike and Scottie, and God was proving I could rely on him in the clutch, every second of every day.

The inmates in my cell complained about me often and regularly told the officer they didn't want me in the cell with them. The feeling was mutual to say the least and prior to meeting the officer knew the relationship status between myself and the entire cell wasn't good at all. I then remembered that months before I asked if I could leave that cell and even went as far as to ask to go to solitary to get away from the inmates I saw daily. Though I never complained, all along the officer knew exactly what had been taking place within my cell, and he knew at some point things would intensify. This led to the officer stating, “in order to prevent any further altercations, I am going to move you to another cell.” I was super excited to get out of that cell, to get away from all the negative energy and daily threats that surrounded me, but I thought how could the next cell differ from my first two. It was more like a sigh of relief because despite the fact that no one liked me there, I didn't want to do anything that I would regret and would prolong my stay. I didn't know how much longer I would be able to restrain myself.

When I got back to the cell, I began to pack up my clothing, blankets, snacks, books, letters and everything else I didn't want to leave behind. As I was being escorted out, the inmates began to clap and cheer at my departure. I chuckle as I leave thinking of how naive they were but also because it was actually funny that they were cheering. I was moved into the next cell over and once inside, after seeing that the number of people within the cell were nearly the same, and they too were all Chinese men, I assumed the energy of the inmates and how I was treated by them would be exactly the same as well. I mentally prepared myself to encounter the same things I did in my previous 2 cells, racism, hostility, negativity, and hate.

I am given the same area to sit and sleep as I had in my previous cells and as soon as I sat down, a Chinese inmate passed a small note to me which read in English “hello, we can study English and Chinese together”. I initially thought the guy was weird and I didn't want to talk to anyone. The Chinese men would smile like everything is cool then spread negativity and try to make me more of an outcast than I already was. Nothing differed but where I was located. I simply decided to ignore my new cellmate but he continued to send small notes written in English. This was the first time I had seen English words written by someone other than my family or myself and when I looked over to him, he was looking directly at me with a huge smile on his face.

The next note he sends says, “Hi, my name is Jack.” I'm now irritated at his continued attempt to engage in conversation and begin to think, if this guy is looking for a

boyfriend, I'm whooping his ass. I continued to ignore Jack until he switched seats with the inmate who had been next to me. It turns out, he's simply trying to converse with the only foreigner in the entire prison. Little did I know, Jack would become my closest friend while in prison. We soon began to study, talk, and get to know each other. We were the same age and both loved world travels. And ironically, while we were free, we stayed walking distance from one another. He, just as I, had a son, but his son was much younger than mine. When Jack told me he had been sentenced to 10 years for tax evasion, my mind was blown. I then began to think a decade is what everyone charged with a crime got in China. How could they possibly give someone 10 years for not only a nonviolent crime, but failure to pay taxes. My mind took me to my own case and how I had been locked up for being attacked, so I knew not paying the government their money could get you a life sentence. He told me since he already received his judgment he would be transferred to prison soon but didn't know exactly when. Though Jack spoke good English he wanted me to teach him as much English as I could so he could speak fluently before he was transferred and he would teach me Chinese in return. Learning Chinese from a Chinese person didn't sound like a bad idea either because I knew there had to be a better way to learn than the way I had been learning.

I always wondered how Chinese people got their English names and I really wanted to know how my Chinese brother chose the name Jack, but I never asked. One day while in casual conversation he said something to me that made me laugh but it also allowed me to understand where he got his name of choice from. He's looking at the pictures I'd received of my family and friends and randomly says to me, "when I'm finally able to go free, I'm going to go find my Rose". I respond by saying "bro what are you talking about", then I am in uncontrollable laughter. I'm laughing so hard that all the other inmates are looking back at us, and my stomach is aching from laughter. "Bro", I exclaimed, "you're telling me that you chose the name Jack because of the movie *titanic*!?" And, the look on his face after I asked this question made me laugh even harder. While I was free many Chinese people asked me about *The Titanic*, so I knew the movie was extremely popular in China but to know my Chinese brother was named after Leonardo DiCaprio's character surprised me. "Ok International Jack, we have to find your Rose."

Finally, I was in a cell where I wasn't hated by every single person inside it. It helped bring a calmness over my mind and spirit. I was also able to learn some Chinese from someone who spoke the language and actually wanted me to be able to speak and understand it as well. Jack started to teach me the tones in which the language was spoken and how the tone you use while saying a word can completely change its meaning. I began to try speaking more Chinese with those around me as well, some understood and some didn't but I felt my confidence growing with each day as I learned more of the language. As I was being taught a language, I was also teaching one and we used everything around us as a learning tool. I felt the best way for Jack to learn English was to read English. I had been receiving books, magazines, and letters on a monthly basis so I thought it would be a good idea for him to read these things. He began fluently reading everything from Sports magazines to funny letters from my friends and any time he saw a word that he needed help pronouncing or wanted to know the definition, I was there to help. We got more in

depth with our learning and soon we desired an English-Chinese dictionary. Even though purchasing books was allowed each month, our request to buy a dictionary was denied. I wanted to know why I couldn't simply buy a dictionary when all I wanted to do was learn, then it hit me. I wasn't allowed to purchase a dictionary because bettering myself was forbidden. I was there to be broken down, not built up.

The food being served for consumption daily were things I'd previously considered unpalatable but if I didn't want to starve, I had to eat. Breakfast was rice soup and a piece of bread every morning but twice a week we received a boiled egg. For me, Lunch was rice and cabbage everyday unless I purchased a pack of noodles, chicken feet or beef to eat. Others in the cell were served anything from pig blood to tofu. These and other entrées were considered luxury within the facility. For dinner it was rice and cabbage again. Some seasons we were served melon, pumpkin or potatoes, but 90% of the time I was digesting cabbage. Though the meals taste terrible and being there eating the same thing every day made it taste even more inedible. I was grateful that I had food, and daily I thanked God for the meals I was served. I thought of the many people in the world who didn't know where their next meal would come from and I had been blessed with 3 meals a day. Yet, I desire more. I desired better.

I devoured lobster and steak on a daily basis. My lobster and steak were the letters and pictures that I received and consumed daily. Though it was difficult to receive my reading material, with each monthly visit from the American Embassy, they were always sure to bring things that would not only keep my attention but also held sentimental value to me. I wasn't expecting the translation process to be so lengthy and everything written to me and from me was translated by a minimum of 4 people. There were many occasions where I wouldn't be given my things until the Embassy came back to visit the next month. I asked about my letters, pictures and books nearly every day until I received them because seeing and reading these things calmed my soul and allowed my mind to go beyond the prison cell. When I did receive them, I read the letters from my family and friends every day and I could hear the voice of whomever letter I had, while I read it. I wasn't allowed to call home and there were no visits from family and friends either, so everything that we wanted to say to one another had to be written on paper. Writing letters to send home and reading the ones I received gave me so much strength because it was our only form of communication with one another, and we greatly needed it.

I quickly realized, I never knew how important the basic forms of communications were until I was unable to communicate and forced to live without the ones that I loved most and had become accustomed to having access to on a daily basis. No face to face visits, FaceTime, computer, or phone calls, so all we could do is think of one another. Those thoughts had to last me until I could receive my letters because the translation process just wouldn't speed up.

The letters that were sent to me, and the letters I sent out to my family and friends were translated by 4 to 10 people each time. The main reason my letters were translated by so many people was so everyone within the facility would be able to discuss what I wrote about. My letters and their contents were always the topic of conversation amongst the

inmates and the officers. My pictures were passed around and looked through by both officers and inmates before I received them. And there were too many instances to count where the embassy representatives showed me handfuls of letters but I would receive only a few.

I wasn't allowed to expose anything that was taking place within the jail in my letters as it had been outlawed for me to speak about my case, the conditions of the prison, or even write words such as "China" or even "Lawyer" in my letters. The smallest thing would get my letters confiscated. On one instance where I wrote a letter to my family stating, I was innocent and the letter was torn into pieces in my face. If I wrote too small, crossed out a word, or if one of the translators didn't know a word's meaning, that entire letter would be destroyed right before my eyes. Though what I could say in my letters was extremely limited, I wanted my family to hear from me so they knew I was ok and I also wanted them to know how much I missed and loved them. I made a point to tell the American government to emphasize to my family what they could or more so couldn't say in their letters to me also because I needed to hear from them just as they needed to hear from me and we couldn't cut our only line of communication. Not being able to see or speak to one another was hard as we were worried about the well-being of one another daily. I always wanted my family and friends to have good feelings when they thought of me and when they finally received a letter from me, I wanted them to know I was standing strong and with my head held high. I wanted everyone to know that I was covered by God and I was His Warrior. Despite being in such a dangerous place, with death lingering always, I was safe and refused to be broken, physically, mentally, or spiritually.

I ensured my letters consisted of the fun times and memories that we'd shared together and I made sure to tell them that we would soon be making even better memories. My family couldn't write about everything they were doing on my behalf in an attempt to get me released but I received photos that let me know what was happening and how hard they were working in both America and China. It was through some of these same pictures that I was forced to watch my younger cousins, nephew, and son Grow Up. I always wanted to strengthen them all and keep their hopes up, and as we sent each other love through those letters and pictures, we were encouraging one another. Since they sent me pictures and photographs of them, I wanted to make sure I could send them a few also. I sent the artwork I had drawn, poems I'd written, songs that I had on mental repeat and bible verses. Anything that would help uplift them, anything that would let them know that I would not and could not be broken, so neither should they. When they read my letters, I wanted them to be strengthened, instantly receiving good feelings, and to know that we were going to get through this situation. I knew they could hear my voice as they read my letters as I could hear theirs, so I couldn't allow them to have any negative thoughts in their minds nor their hearts when they thought of me. They had to know we were all going to be Ok and God would indeed take care of us. These were the things I devoured and consumed on a daily basis, and they tasted like Love. While everyone around me ate bugs, brains, blood, and whatever else the jail served that I wouldn't dare consider putting into my body, I ate like a king. I had Lobster and Steak.

Those letters were EVERYTHING! Some people I shared my cell with had nothing to look forward to, no mail, no pictures, no one sending them clothing and winter coats, no one wanting to make sure they were doing ok, yet I had all of those things. I was extremely grateful and reading them and looking at those pictures always filled me with great feelings. I received a bit more strength with each word I read and with each smiling face I saw. Excitement and a great rush of positive emotions filled me each time I received mail. Though I was all alone physically, I was never truly alone. So many people were with me as I fought negative thoughts, lying lawyers and even the Chinese government daily, and through it all, because of the support I had, I always thought of those who had it worst off than me and wished they could be in my place. To have so many people who cared enough to send me their love through words.

Time slowed down any time there were no outlets for me to mentally get away. Knowing this, when the embassy came to visit me, they always came with other reading material outside of letters. I received everything from fiction novels, to autobiographies, to self-help books, to sports magazines, and I read every word in them, even the pages filled with advertisements and other things. Many books kept me occupied because though I wasn't speaking to people too often nor able to leave my cell, reading was one of the ways I got a chance to get away from everything. I read while free but while incarcerated, I read more than I had ever read in my life.

In order to write, ink and paper had to be purchased, but unlike every other inmate who had to purchase envelopes and stamps to send their letters, my letters were sent by the American Embassy. I did receive some letters from friends who stayed within China but to ensure they always received their letters, instead of sending through the jail officials I sent mine out the same way despite being in the country, I gave them directly to the embassy. Neither pencils nor ink pens were on the list to purchase only ink pen refills, so every person had to make their own pen if they wanted one. I had never made an ink pen before but I soon successfully learned how to make one. I used paper from some of the magazines that I had already read a few times over and used some pictures I thought looked cool. I took those pages, rolled them up until the paper was tight around the ink refill, then I used glue to seal it. There were not many things an inmate could feel good about, so having a nice pen was something some inmates could smile about. I always kept a cool pen. I wrote so often that I needed a new pen refill almost daily. I wrote down my dreams, thoughts, feelings, future plans, and I even wrote down daily affirmations which I recited aloud daily.

Artwork kept me both creative and positive but one of the greatest pieces of art I sent home to my family was one that I didn't draw. When I opened my eyes one day after my morning prayer and mediation session, one of the men within my cell walked over to me and handed me a piece of paper. When I looked at the paper I was filled with exceeding joy. I smiled at the Chinese inmate and thanked him many times. He had drawn a photo of me meditating. I was extremely thankful and I knew exactly what to do with it. I had the man sign the picture and when the embassy came, I made sure to send it to my family. Since I had been incarcerated nearly 2 years, my family and I had not seen one another, so

I was excited to send this picture. It would be my family's first look at me since I was attacked.

Daily, I just sat within my cell waiting. Waiting for someone to come in and tell me I was free to go. As I waited, I read the indictment over and over and over again. I'd read so many things that I knew were wrong and I couldn't believe that despite everything that was written in the indictment, I was still imprisoned. I read the testimony of my attackers telling the police they wanted to hurt me. That always took my thoughts to the prosecution saying I deserve the max sentence of 10 years because of the way I look. Each time I read the indictment and took notes on it, I was more convinced I was an innocent man, being railroaded and forced into imprisonment, while the Chinese government refused to release me.

I soon began to feel I was being held at someone else's will and there was nothing I could do about it. Forced to wait while my case and verdict were delayed. I felt the Chinese government intended to make an already lengthy process as unbearable as possible for me and I didn't know why. As much as I didn't want to understand why I was being treated this way, or what they wanted me to say or do, I did. I understood fully. It was racism. It was prejudice. It was the lack of civil rights. It was the lack of due process. It was communism. It was an injustice. It was China.

I was a political prisoner and as I spoke with my untrustworthy lawyer who remained, I was reminded of all the terrible things I had read, seen, or heard about the country prior to my imprisonment. The only thing Lawyer FengPi and I spoke about was paying my attackers and pleading guilty. I understood the Chinese government intended for me to give my life away after I was extorted. Their plan was for me to sit and rot in prison for at least a decade. The process was one like I had never seen before. Unlike the American criminal proceedings, due process didn't exist in China. I came from a system where you're innocent until proven guilty, but in China I was guilty from the moment I stepped off the plane. Absolutely nothing could prove my innocence. Everything just seemed so backwards, everything about what I was experiencing was totally amiss.

I quickly learned that extortion was a business in China. This was another thing I had heard about while free. I had even seen examples of it while watching Chinese sitcoms and movies, but to witness it first hand was absurd. I learned that in China only two things mattered, money and relationships. I learned that I was stranded, in a pay or lay system. I was being shown that there was no innocence for me, and I would be treated as if I was guilty no matter what the evidence showed and proved.

Every month when the American embassy would come to visit me, so did one of the judges over my case and I would take advantage of their presence each time by asking her to stay and speak with me. Though the judge who always came didn't speak English, she always had two translators with her and I used each visit to ask about my case directly. I asked, how long was I really going to be held and why was I still there to begin with. These questions were never completely answered, but the judge continued to feed me the story that they were looking at the notes, and looking at all the evidence. I was told they were

looking at the case closely but I was never told that I was going home. This caused me to write letters for the judges each time they visited describing not only the night I was attacked but everything that I had seen, heard, and read in the indictment. Using my education background, and knowledge of right and wrong, I wrote about everything I remembered from recollection of the day I finally went to court. I dissected my case through written words and did so verbally as well each time I saw the judges, but I did it respectfully. I never expressed outward anger nor the frustration I was feeling daily, just the hunger for justice and the desire to be freed.

I felt I had a good understanding of my case and I thought about everything that was said by the prosecution while preparing my letters to the judges. As I read the indictment and thought harder about my case, my ability to agree with any part of imprisonment was nonexistent. I thought about being a judge, knowing self-defense exists in the written law, then watching a video of 2 men who start unarmed, pick up weapons and attack another. Men who charge towards another with the sole intention of doing him bodily harm. I had already been wrongfully incarcerated too long and I knew that I could not plead guilty. First because I knew that I was innocent being held under false accusations of assault, and second because if I plead guilty now, it would seem as if the whole time my time behind bars would have been rightly justified. I would have no argument and I would be guilty because even I said, I was guilty.

When it came to me and my case, guilt was a complete lie and I couldn't say it. If I did choose to plead guilty with the hope of immediately being released, I would not receive the justice I had been waiting for. I knew, at this point, after nearly two years of standing firm in my innocence, if I entered a plea of guilt, I would never go home and the Chinese government would take pride in holding me for as long as possible. My criminal justice degree and background in political science, gave me the basic knowledge to understand what was happening to me and to stand firm in my decision to not enter a plea of guilt, but it was more about my faith that I would be exonerated and everyone would know that I was innocent and held unjustly. It was my belief in God and knowing that he would see me through the injustice I was facing. I knew God had already planned to exalt me and lift me up at the end, I just had to persevere.

Learning the truth about my case, knowing that despite all the evidence being in my favor, and I was still locked away, was disheartening. To know that the Chinese government could do someone so wrong and have no remorse about it, made things a bit harder for me as I waited for a verdict. I stayed in prayer and meditation but I also stayed believing God's way was higher than mine and ultimately the right way. I focused my attention and thoughts on the fact that God knew all things and it would be a perfect ending to a tumultuous story. Daily I asked God to strengthen me so I could get through. I asked him to protect me so that no harm would come to me, but I was more focused on the mental, emotional, and spiritual, because I knew I could handle the physical. I never stopped believing that my prayers were being heard and that I had already received everything that I had asked for. There were many things that were getting me through, it was letters, pictures, Bible verses, thoughts, memories, dreams, it was God. The Spirit of God was walking me through.

I encouraged my family to dedicate time daily to bible reading, prayer, and meditation as we grew closer to God during our hardship. I couldn't stop reading and praying, and as I learned, I sent Bible verses and my interpretation of them back home to my family so that they may be uplifted and encouraged by God just as I was. We shared Bible verses every month with one another, we shared words of inspiration, and we relied on God's word, and one another for strength. I had many songs in my mind, on mental repeat. Many songs kept me feeling empowered and uplifted. Music kept me going stronger, and going higher. Some of the music ranged from rap, to gospel, to old school R&B, every genre of music played in my head to escape everything else I heard. I had to get away but the only place to go was inside. Going inside myself was the only place I could go to get peace and quiet because there was always noise, loud talking, arguing, and fighting, everywhere else. If I wanted stillness or to be alone for a moment, I had to go where God lives. Within me.



Artwork drawn by Wendell during imprisonment

Hey dad it's your son
Wendell I miss and love
you I haven't seen you in
two years I'm a decade
you are my knight in
shining armor I love you
with all my heart

Letter from Wendell's son to keep his spirits up

3/1/17
1:42pm

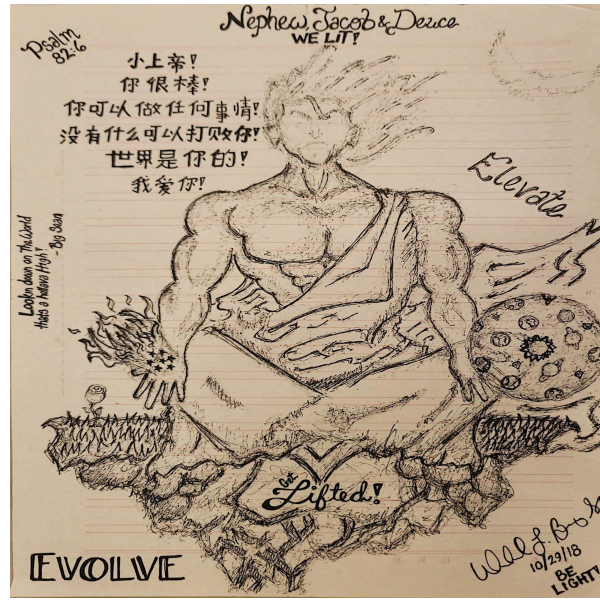
To All My family whom I love throughout the continents of Asia, Europe, & North America:
Honor, Praise, & Glory to the Most High Yaff, through Yahshua Messiah for Blessing me with
such a beautiful band of people whom I can lean on in order to regain both focus &
strength. I thank you for all that you are doing for me, while I fight the toughest
fight of my life! I know this battle is not physical but spiritual & I also know I'm not
just fighting for myself & my family, but a multitude of people, and I'm more than grateful
because you all have extended yourselves to be my crutch! Again, I thank you! I
love Yaff so much & what keeps me encouraged, are all the memories we've been blessed
to share with each other. The thought of us building more, and those that are even
more beautiful got me that pumpin' like Arsenio! LOL! Faras, I'm excited! But
some days I wake up & look around like WTF bro, you really in jail! And in
China! And No, Wendell didn't go to China & try to turn thug! LOL! But being in
here, in isolation, away from those I care for & who care for me, I think of all the
luxuries that to us, may not even be considered a luxury. Like lotion, a comb, hot
showers, a toilet, going outside, or even eating & being around skulls & eggs that
you know are pure & have no deceit behind them! I think of so many things I've been
blessed with my whole life that I've simply taken for granted. I've also been thinking
about my life & where it's been & where it's heading & what mark do I truly want to
leave! What defines me! What will the legacy of Wendell Brown Jr. actually be?!
And plainly, I just want to give! I want to give all things to my people! I want to
give Love, Life, Laughter, Opportunity, Experience, & so much more! And when I say my
people I don't just speak of my family & friends, but all **God's** children! All those I've
encountered in my travels around the world, all those I have yet to encounter, & those
whom I may not even physically meet. I want to positively affect their lives too! My
desire to build people up all over the world, along with fulfilling my destiny & life's
purpose are 2 things I often pray for! I just wanna be right, you know?! I don't
wanna miss it or come up short, but Yaff willing, I won't. I know I won't! HalleluYaff!
I think of those in the Bible who stood firm in their faith and what came to be of them after
their test & since I know His ways & thoughts are higher than mine, I know the road
ahead is full of Blessings! And Not just for me, but for US! HalleluYaff! And because I
know The Most High possesses so much power, and I know His spirit is living within
our physical being, I'm convinced we are already victorious! And in more ways than
one! HalleluYaff! I want to say so much more but this letter already pushing it. (LOL)
So Again, thank you to all of you! Please continue to pray and send me your positive
energy and I will continue to do the same for you in return! I love you all To
Life! Grace, Peace, Prosperity, Love, & an abundance of Blessings in The Name of The
Most High God!

Wendell S. Brown Jr.

DEUCE, YO DADDY LOVES
YOU!

年 月 日 第 页

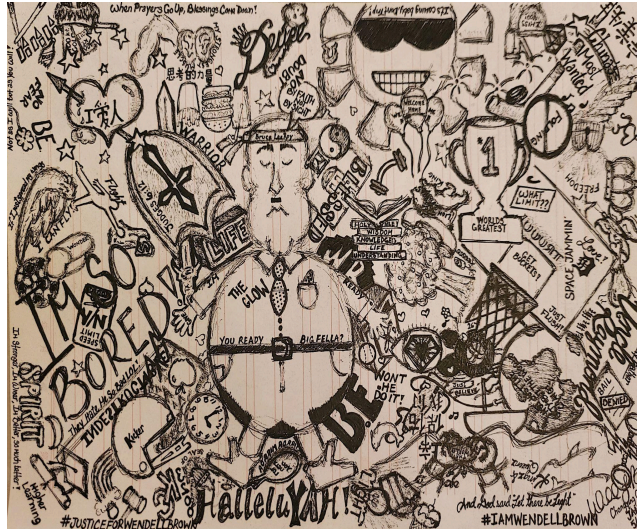
Letter written by Wendell for family and friends



Artwork drawn by Wendell during imprisonment

bro!! 100 🍌 Keep your head , which I ain't gotta tell you cause I know the type of man you are, but I'm still praying and God gone see you through .. I know you know karate now but don't think you can beat my ass.. When you get home ima get you a pack of Ramon Noodles and roasted crickets cause I know that's all you want now .. whatever for my Brodie 100 100 🍌🍌 lol but naw i love you bro, can't wait to hear from you and. More than anything see you come home 🍌🍌 100 100 Yo

Letter from Wendell's friend to keep him uplifted



Artwork drawn by Wendell during imprisonment

wenlong charge

兄弟你还好吗? 我出来这么久才给你写信你
不会怪我吧! 大哥我出来以后天天都想给你写信但是我
一出来就被人批评, 兄弟在里面好好的接受改造, 争
取早点出来, 出来了来重庆, 给我发信息, 我亲自带你
去吃火锅, 带你来金佛山滑雪。

好兄弟多的不说了, 带我向管教说一下感谢他对我
照顾, 没能拖根火因就出来了 😊 顺便说一下兄弟有没有
游戏里面的大美女? 那都是你的菜哦, 加油 😊

You will always be my best brother, and in my
heart you are the greatest forever

The lawyer fucking sells batch

only ~~wait~~ wait for your return

When you wrote back to me you teach me 英语, your brother

The send me English words? 2018年5月21

Thank you, eldest brother

Letter to Wendell from Chinese inmate who'd been released



Portrait of Wendell drawn by Chinese inmate during daily meditation



Wendell's vision board created while imprisoned in China

July 1, 2018

My dearest son Wendell,

OMG! I was totally devastated with the verdict. When I tell you only God. Gods process of Victory will be so amazing to witness ~~1st~~ hand.

I'm so proud of you son, your strength, your faith, your spirit, and your love for so many people.

It use to take a village to raise a child, but you? Gods Son it took the world. Everyone is behind you and this injustice (BS) believe me #SALVATION IS NEAR You already know I was mad as hell, trying to fuck over my baby. God got you and us.

Continue to remain strong in prayer and know we all are working for you and others there. Never in a million years would I have thought of a situation like this.

But I proudly embrace the challenge. I love you so much son. It hurt my heart when your son facetime me crying about the world breaking news about his dad. He loves you and miss you so much just like we all do. I won't complain because I already know we will see you sooner than you think. Please don't give up, because we not giving up on you. Looking forward to seeing and hugging you soon. #Gods Process #Bringhome Wendell Brown

Love Momma Brown
Antiaette Brown

Letter from Wendell's mother

Chapter Fifteen

THE GREAT ESCAPE

Better to die fighting for freedom than be a prisoner all the days of your life.

-Bob Marley

The plight of a black man is misunderstood, underrated and almost always ignored when it comes to seeking justice. Having the opportunity to showcase my talent and expertise while assisting others was a dream come true for me. I'd felt like I'd broken generational curses, like I was the example my family, friends, and community needed. Though I was still setting goals for myself, I felt as if I'd made it! I'd faced stereotypes and racial discrimination many times, but when I traveled internationally, I believed it would no longer exist. I was no longer African American, but plainly American. Traveling from country to country, seeing views of the world that my ancestors could only dream of. One night, while reaping the benefits of my success I was shown that I had not traveled far enough to get beyond discrimination, racism, and stereotypes. Though according to my passport, I was simply an American, I was a foreigner with no solid protection.

It wasn't until my court date did I see I was fighting a battle that so many people had been fighting long before me. I saw that anybody who traveled could have, at any time, be wrongfully jailed. What I was experiencing had been going on for centuries before my arrival to China and it was happening everywhere. Injustice was alive and real. I now understood fully what and who I was fighting for. I was fighting for justice. Justice for all those who were facing unwarranted hardships. I was fighting for all those foreigners who had been traveling around the world and ran into unjustified punishment. I was fighting for people not just in the country I was being held captive within, but those in every other country where wrongdoing, and injustice happened systemically.

This led me to think of all the men and women who had been unreasonably charged with crimes they hadn't committed prior to me and those who were to come after. I thought of the people who told me of their woes within the county. I thought of all those videos I had watched of foreigners and even those of Chinese descent being beaten by gangs of men. I thought of the people who had mysteriously gone missing in the country. I thought of a black man who'd been beaten within inches of his life inside a Chinese bar only months before I was attacked. That incident, just as mine, was on video, yet no one faced any consequences for the harm caused. I thought of another black man I had met while traveling the country, who had been found dead with no arrest or leads. No one was held responsible for his death. I thought of the funds being raised just to send his dead body home. I thought of his family. I thought of injustice and I saw myself in those

situations and all those people who had been supporting me, saw themselves in mine. They saw themselves wearing handcuffs, with pain in their eyes, as they sat being wrongfully accused and tried in court. It wasn't fair, and somebody had to do something about it. I had to do something about it. God had me there for that reason!

There was not much in my cell besides bars. There was no mirror, no calendar, no clock. Nothing that would help me keep track of the days or time, in which I had spent in that putrid place. I had no idea how long I would be forced to stay since I had yet to receive a verdict but I knew I had been jailed too long. The only way I could keep track of how long it had been imprisoned was by writing tally marks on a sheet of paper each morning. I always keep track of the days and Jack asked me why I did so, stating it made time move slower. My stay did seem extremely long and I knew what Jack meant. Since I was being held with no verdict, no release date, no end in sight, I couldn't help but agree, because days felt like months and months like years, with an eternity to go.

I often thought about the lack of communication by the Chinese government when it pertained to my case. Their willingness to be wrong without remorse, and the continuous attempt to force me to say I'm guilty. I couldn't help but think the Chinese government wanted my thoughts to eat me alive. I refused to allow them to see me doing anything besides standing strong. I made it my mission to mentally and spiritually leave that cell daily though physically I was enclosed in a cage. Writing, drawing, reading, praying, meditating, all these things took me above where I was physically. I also made it mandatory to find something to laugh at each day. Some days those things were harder to find but every day I found something. Whether I laughed at a letter written to me, a letter I had written and sent out, a commercial on tv, or the facial expressions and bad breath of those I shared the cell with. Even though I laughed daily, I still got upset as I couldn't help thinking about the law in China and how, according to it, I was innocent. Innocent yet unallowed to leave. The truth is, I was an innocent man being held captive, against my will and for ransom in a foreign country.

According to the written Chinese law I should not have spent one day in jail and I felt like anybody with the minimum amount of knowledge or education in criminal justice, law, or even right and wrong could judge my case. It was a simple open and shut case, yet I had been imprisoned for over a year. I was clearly being wronged. I was being shown by the government that my attackers, by simply being Chinese natives, were the true law-abiding citizens. I was being shown that the two men who picked up weapons and aimed to physically harm me were the good guys. Daily I was being shown by the government that they were going to treat me, the "big black man" from America, as a criminal regardless of what I had done or what I hadn't done. How could I be the one treated like a criminal? I was the only one who truly abided by the law that night. I was treated as a threat to society while my attackers, who were in fact hurting innocent people, were free to do as they pleased.

Each time I receive a visit from my lawyer FengPi or a judge, I am asked about paying and pleading. I didn't know which was more absurd, the fact that I was in the middle of an extortion attempt or that I went to court and still had yet to receive a verdict. Those

over my case had no intention of releasing me. Many times, in letters to the judge I asked, “is this how justice is conducted in China?” and “Is this how the law is upheld in China?” Unfortunately, we already knew the answer.

My first love did everything in her power to bring our pain to an end. I'll never forget just days before going off to college as a 17-year-old kid, asking her to sign a waiver for me to be able to get a tattoo because I was a minor without a parent. I'll never forget how skeptical I was as I went to multiple places to ensure it didn't say anything other than what my mother was, “my first love.” I'll never forget the look of excitement in her eyes, and her smile as tears ran down her face. The irony of the words “my first love” being in the same language of the country I was now held captive, and my mother turning China, America, and the world upside down, to bring me back to her.

My mother, my first love, did everything in her power to see me set free. Reaching out to people in high places to ask for help, advocating for me with every ounce of her being. Speaking to anyone who would listen. Her faith was tested much but she stayed faithful as she began working with government officials all over the country. She started reaching out to every media and news outlet in America to draw attention to my case. My mother made sure anybody with ears heard my name and was informed about the injustice I was facing thousands of miles away. She wanted to make sure everyone with eyes saw that I had a history of helping others, spreading love and positivity in every country I'd ever entered. She wanted people to know that I was being wrongfully imprisoned. My First love did everything she possibly could and she spearheaded the movement, a campaign for justice. It was the Free Wendell Brown movement.

After a year and a half of lies, deceit and untrustworthy antics, my lawyer FengPi was finally relieved of his duty and no one was more excited about the move than I was. I was called out of my cell and escorted to a meeting area. While I walked, I was passed by no one other than the inmate who had access to all my personal belongings. My lawyer was informing us both that he had just been fired. FengPi was alone and for the first visit without a translator. As I sat there handcuffed to the desk, I was surprised to hear FengPi start to speak English. He tells me I have to sign some papers to relieve him of his services. I was excited about what was happening because I would never have to see him again, but I was upset at the same time. For nearly 2 years, he hadn't said one word to me in English but all of a sudden, FengPi was putting complete sentences together. It added to the list of things he had done that were disturbing from the moment we met. To know that he was trying to get me to plead guilty but had done no work on my behalf upset me, and I was excited to wash my hands with him. I would never have to see Lawyer FengPi again.

Every night after being counted by the police officers, inmates were able to watch television. While watching the news, The Black Lives Matter movement was getting a lot of worldwide coverage, due to the wrongful killings of many black people in America. Every time the news spoke about the state of America because of race, every person in the cell turned to look at me. One day I was asked, how is it in America? I responded by saying, it's amazing, it's my home, I love it. Then he proceeds to ask “but, how is it? What does it feel like to live in a place where it's black people versus white people?” “It's not black people

versus white people" I responded. "In America it's not like that at all!", to which he simply responded by saying, "yes, it is, the history of America has always been that way. It has always been black versus white there". I was taken aback because this man was ready to debate with me about the state of my nation, my home country, a place he had never been. And he was right. I was so embarrassed because he was indeed right. I simply said "no, it's good versus bad, it has nothing to do with skin color." Not only was I embarrassed, I was in shock because a Chinese man knew and called me out on the history and culture of my country.

On my next visit from the embassy, I was told about some college students from America visiting China on a school basketball trip. They had been caught shoplifting which led them to be arrested and to face some legal trouble, but their circumstances had been a lot more favorable than mine. The president of the United States had been in China during the same time they had been arrested for stealing and their university along with the President of the United States and other US government officials worked together to get them released from jail. They were free of any legal actions after spending very little time being detained.

An 18 year old Chinese kid had been arrested for stealing and was now within my cell. Daily he was being bullied by some of the older inmates and was frightened anytime someone said something to him or came near. One day as one of the inmates was trying to fight the young Chinese inmate, his eyes swelled with dread and tears began to flow. I could no longer stand aside and witness what was happening to the kid and I intervened. "Fight me, don't fight him!" I exclaimed, stepping in front of the young man. "You want to fight, come on, lets fight!" And the bully who no longer felt the need to fight, said nothing to me but went over to talk with his friends. I was very happy for the young men of UCLA and as I looked around I couldn't imagine any 19-year-old American kids being where I was. I was most thankful because their situation, the lack of legal action taken against them, and the young men avoiding long term imprisonment shined a huge light on the injustice that I was facing within the same country they had just been blessed with great favor. People all over the world were now hearing about everything my family and I had been going through for over a year. My family and friends had been fighting for me and I had done nothing wrong while the young men who had been caught breaking the law were able to avoid incarceration. The spotlight on my captivity and my innocence was needed. My case began to gain more media attention. Showcasing all of the good deeds that I had done in China and many other countries that I'd played in and traveled to. The letters I had written to family and friends were now being shared. People began to take notice that I, an innocent man, was being wrongfully held. My case began to get so much attention that one of the top officials from Beijing flew in to see me. He informed me of all the awareness that was being brought to me and my family's unfortunate situation. I was told that many people were on board trying to help set me free and I was beyond grateful for all the people who, out of the kindness of their hearts, began to reach out to my family and government officials to aid me in the midst of such a crisis. My family and others began to reach out to the President of the United States hoping I too could receive some assistance from him

with my wrongful imprisonment. Each person thinking the same thing, “if he can get guilty people released, it should be easy for him to get an innocent man freed.”

My case has now reached many news media outlets from ESPN, CNN, MSNBC and more. I got excited because I felt that the Chinese government would have to let me go now that many people knew I was being wrongfully held. I was being told that now the entire world knew of my fight for justice but I was mind blown when I was shown a clip where a panel of three news anchors all begin to chant “FREE WENDELL BROWN!! FREE WENDELL BROWN!! FREE WENDELL BROWN!!” I smiled and also began to chant, “FREE WENDELL BROWN!”

Chapter Sixteen

钱 & 关系

(Money & Relationships)

Always down for the cause, never down for the count. I guess when your stars align, you do like the solar system and plan it out.

-Big Sean

Days before Christmas of 2017, I received a visit from a Chinese man. When I arrived at the meeting room, I had no idea who I was sitting in front of. He begins to speak Chinese to the officers that locked me into the desk but when they leave, he relaxes and starts to speak English. His English was a bit broken, but we could hold a conversation. That's when he said, "my name is Lawyer Liu and I have been hired to help you get home." He then proceeds to tell me that "friends" sent him to my aid. A letter was then read to me that told me people wanted to help so they sent a lawyer to me but still referred to themselves as only friends of mine. When I asked who these friends of mine were exactly, I was told they preferred not to disclose their identity. This was my 4th lawyer and knowing that those who sent him to represent me didn't want to make themselves known just didn't sit well with me.

We spoke a bit about my case and he had already been informed that it had been months since I appeared in court but I had yet to receive a verdict. Lawyer Liu then stated that in order for me to get released, TianShi needed a bit more help, especially since we had just fired Lawyer FengPi. After I signed all the necessary paperwork that would add him to my list of counsel, Lawyer Liu said he would be back in a few days to discuss our strategy. I waited for the officers to come retrieve me and just before I was escorted away, the new lawyer asked, "Do you want an apple?" Thinking, why would he randomly ask me if I wanted an apple, I responded "no, I just want to go home."

My lawyer TianShi, was still in America and because she was leaving everything in Lawyer Liu's care, there would be constant communication between the two of them, and he was to conduct everything just as she would. I thought of the advice she gave me before departing China, "Do Not Plead Guilty" and I swore I wouldn't because like we both knew, it wasn't the truth. I knew she and my support system was fighting for my physical freedom as I fought for my mental and spiritual freedom. She went on to say she wanted me to continue to stand firm, to keep believing, and that she was extremely proud of me. She was everything I needed and I was so thankful that she has been able to represent me. I vowed to not let them down.

The next time Lawyer Liu came to visit he was accompanied by a translator, and as we began to speak about my case, I got the feeling that my new lawyer didn't believe in my innocence as much as Lawyer TianShi did. He and his translator said the best thing for me to do was to confess guilt because that would be the only way to get me released immediately. I couldn't believe that was true and nothing in my heart and mind was convinced either. Each time I received a visit, Lawyer Liu and his translator came with more reasons why guilt would free me but each time I was unable to receive their logic. I couldn't agree less with both of them. I was sure to express my innocence and my reasoning behind such beliefs. This led the lawyer to say that he would no longer be able to help me if I didn't agree to enter a plea of guilt. He even went so far as to say that my friends who had sent him to help may not be willing to help me anymore if I didn't plead guilty. My thoughts went directly to the fact that I had no idea who these so-called friends were. I wasn't sure if they genuinely had my best interests at heart or if it was somebody sent to try to hurt my chances of being freed at all. What I did know is what God told me. I knew God said he was trying to prove I was innocent and if I plead guilty there was no innocence after that, so I continued to stand firm in my innocence and stand firm in my faith.

Chained to a desk, I'm expressing that as an innocent man I am unallowed to go free. Being a guilty man, I know I will never go home and going home is the outcome I want. "I can not and will not plead guilty." I thought about the last conversation I had with TianShi before she left. I believe she knew that Lawyer Liu would try to get me to plead guilty and this made me love and cherish my lawyer even more than I had before. She knew exactly what I was thinking and stood there with me. Telling me to stand firm and for the truth no matter what and do not say I'm guilty. I promised her that I wouldn't. Despite all the harm that could have been done to her because of this process, she was opposing her own countryman and government. She put her livelihood, her family, and her own safety on the line for me. In that moment, I knew I would be grateful for her, love her, and be forever indebted to her.

The only time I wrote anything that didn't have to go through the excruciating translation process is when I was visited by lawyers. Only if they had paperwork that required my signature, fingerprint or needed some sort of written statement to help represent me, these things didn't have to be translated by 10 people. When these instances occurred the necessary paperwork was handed directly to my lawyer by the officers who had come to take me back to my cell. Usually, these papers already had things written on them in Chinese and at times English also, so I only had to write my response in the designated area. Many days lawyer Liu would visit and read letters to me from family and friends who had great concerns when it came to my decision making and ultimately my freedom, because of what they were being told by my lawyer. Prior to Lawyer Liu representing me I was unable to write anything regarding my case. I saw an opportunity to express myself a bit more freely than usual as my case continued to be delayed, lengthening the amount of time I was held without a verdict. I was answering the questions asked by Lawyer Liu but also adding how I truly felt so he and his translator could understand exactly what I thought. I also asked that these things I wrote be shared with my

family. Lawyer Liu helped me get my letters through where I could not only speak my mind fully but also allow the truth of my situation to get back to my family and friends. I had been restricted from doing so prior to this but I was now able to let them all know what was really going on. This was the perfect time and avenue to do so. On the days my lawyer would visit without his translators, he just told the officers that it was stuff for my case which he needed to sign and put my fingerprints on. I don't know exactly what else was said to them that allowed the letters through but on three different occasions I was able to send letters and write exactly how I felt to my family.

Asking Liu what the judges were saying about my case was how I started most meetings. "Why haven't they rendered a judgment yet? What's taking so long?" These were questions I needed answered. Lawyer Liu could speak some English but it wasn't fluent, so having a translator present allowed us to be much more productive. Most of our meetings consisted of Lawyer Liu and his translator telling me I should plead guilty, but I had been so accustomed to hearing this statement that it didn't faze me nor make me alter my thought process. My previous lawyer and translator had done the same thing but instead of aggression and rage these 2 tried to finesse me into pleading guilty by smiling, using calm tones, and advising me. But one day the translator said something that completely irked my soul. Irritated because I refuse to take their legal advice, the translator exclaims, "You don't understand the Chinese law!" This comment only bothered me because I was the person handcuffed to a desk and forced to have a conversation through bulletproof glass. These two men would leave this meeting, drive their expensive cars to dinner and laugh with their friends over shots of rice wine. I on the other hand would be shoved into a cage like an animal and treated as if my physical health, my mental health, and my life in general was completely worthless. "I understand the law in China very well", I responded, "and until they were sitting where I am, innocent yet still in chains, you will never understand Chinese Law as well as I do!"

The interaction between Lawyer Liu, his translator and myself prompted me to write with more detail when I was able to pass letters through. I wanted to ensure my family was aware of exactly what was happening to me and how I was still being pressured to plead guilty. Since they were also being told guilt would be in my best interest, I had to let them know despite what they were being told, pleading guilty would not get me home to them any faster. It would be the worst decision I ever made and I wanted them to know that if I did take their advice, which was the same advice I was being given by my lawyer also, that we all would regret it. No one would regret it more than me and I would have no one to blame but myself. I knew pleading guilty wasn't going to help me but I had to make sure my family knew and understood it also. Liu told me the judges were not answering or returning his phone calls, and when they did answer, which was rare, the judges were solely persuading him to convince me into pleading guilty. I still hadn't gotten an answer about when I would receive a judgment though. I felt the Chinese government planned to simply delay my case over and over again, until I got tired of being in prison with no answer as to when I would leave. This is how they would force me into pleading guilty. They planned to break me. I had to reiterate to Lawyer Liu each time he visited, I am not pleading guilty

and to tell the judges they can stop waiting for me to do so. “I will not tell them I’m guilty when they refuse to tell me I’m guilty. Give me a verdict.”

My case was being extended at a time when the relationship between the faces of the two nations, China and America, were a bit rocky. There were many disagreements between the country leaders that they were unable to see eye to eye nor come to an agreement on. This led to many changes in US sanctions on Chinese technology firms, closure of consulate locations, visa restrictions, and serious challenges to China’s territorial claims over the South China Sea. The “Trade War” also began. Not only did these things not help my case but they were drastically hurting it. The turmoil between leaders was soiling the relationship between the two countries. Were they to be allies or adversaries?

There was a huge difference in how America was being portrayed on the news compared to how other countries were being portrayed, and by watching you knew just how bad things were becoming between the 2 world leaders. Only negative things were being said about America when the news came on and with each day, as the relationship worsened, so did the news coverage. It was obvious to see how it was going between the countries and being an American behind bars while things were unraveling before me, I was getting no favor from inmates, officers, judges, or government officials. As these things heightened, even more people began to reach out to my mother interested in coming on board to help with my situation. Many Ball State Alum, Government Officials, and even people in other countries expressed their interest and willingness to do whatever needed to aid myself and my family. My freedom seemed so close, yet oh so far.

While the relationship between countries continued to deteriorate, my family began scheduling meetings and planned a trip to Washington DC to speak with both the government officials at the US Senate and government officials at the Chinese embassy. My family had already been petitioning but they also planned to protest on my behalf. After renting a twenty-passenger van, they started off. Just getting to Washington DC posed grave danger for my family. Terrified, nearly twenty members of my family drove during an icy snow storm through five states and the Appalachian Mountains. Once in Washington DC, they planned to conduct the necessary meetings, plead my case, and find out what needed to be done to get me freed. Upon arrival in DC, my family found out all the scheduled meetings had been canceled and the entire government area had been shut down. Not only were my family members not allowed to go into the Senate building or the Chinese embassy for the meetings, but while standing in front of the Chinese embassy, they were approached by Chinese officials and told to vacate the premises. Moments later while holding Free Wendell protest signs, Secret Service agents were called out to physically remove my family from the front of the Chinese embassy.

Though it was the sole purpose of the trip to the nation's capital, my family didn’t allow the cancellation of all the meetings to ruin everything they planned to accomplish. My mother continued to call representatives from both the American and Chinese government, asking questions concerning the details of my case and release. My family also held a peaceful protest in my honor in front of The United States Capitol building, the Chinese Embassy, and other buildings in the Federal Triangle. This was the best part of the

trip for my family due to the emptiness of the streets. There was no one in the Federal Triangle which was normally crawling with people and tourists. Because of this both America's and China's government officials couldn't miss the "Free Wendell Brown" protest taking place outside of their buildings. My family were literally the only people outside, and fighting for my freedom.

My embassy visits for November came two days after thanksgiving. When they arrived, our conversation was about how my family was doing in the holiday season and how much I missed spending time with them. Since my birthday was approaching I also spoke about how I never thought I would be spending another birthday in jail. Time was moving so slow and the memories I thought of were the focal point of the letters I sent out that month. The embassy tried to make my day better by bringing me a plate of thanksgiving food. Before I was told what I would receive I noticed the turkey, string bean casserole, dressing, and cake. It was much more, and I instantly began to salivate. I didn't know how this plate would pass the inspection process but I prayed it would because I hadn't eaten anything like that in years. Usually, food was not allowed to be given to inmates unless it came directly from the facility, but after the embassy departed, I was given the two Rubbermaid bowls full of delicious thanksgiving food.

The food arrived before my letters but I felt the food would be able to hold me over for a day or two before I started to ask the officers about my reading material. Nearly an hour later the officers opened the bars of the cell and called me forward. I was given a whole cake with a note attached to the box saying "Happy Birthday." It was from the judge who came to visit me each time the embassy came. I didn't expect to receive a cake and I'm sure no other inmate had ever been given a cake especially from the people who were keeping them imprisoned. I was thankful for the cake and birthday wishes but I wished the judge would have just freed me instead. *We can just go eat cake together on the outside if she wants*, I thought to myself. She kept visiting me, kept smiling at me, kept allowing me time to speak to her but never released me. I felt she knew I was an innocent man and these actions were small gestures of favor. I believed she knew I was undeserving of the treatment I had been receiving for years but she wasn't the person in the position to right the wrong. I knew she had other people alongside her to rule over my case but she also had people over her that she had to answer to and that it may have made it a difficult space for her to be in. She knew I would be grateful for every gesture of favor and grace bestowed upon me regardless of where I was because I knew at any time things could get a lot worse.

I knew everyone in my cell, just like me, hadn't eaten any cake for however long they were inside and some inmates had been in jail long before me, so I cut the cake into 32 small pieces and gave everyone a piece while I ate the last two. Even the guys who didn't like me too much within the cell got a piece. If I was blessed with a favor, I would return it and bless others as well. My plate of thanksgiving food on the other hand, they just had to watch me eat. It had been nearly two years since I've been imprisoned and not only had I yet to receive a verdict, but my family and I were still trying to acquire two things that matter most in China. These two things are extremely important in every part of the world but in China, you cannot sustain life without one or the other. I'd heard of the importance of these things while free

but while imprisoned I saw how far these things got you with examples of it on every tv show and even how far it got those around me in prison. These two things weighed heavier than even the law in China. They were 钱 & 关系, which in English translates to Money and Relationships. At the time I had neither and the sour relationship between my country and the country in which I was being held did not help my cause at all either.

I'd been waiting for a verdict that I clearly would never receive. The Chinese government was blatantly trying to bully me into pleading guilty. I didn't know if it was the fact that I was an educated black man or the fact that I refused to be moved off the stance of my innocence that upset the officials more. After telling my lawyer that I was never pleading guilty and also telling him to inform the judges of this same thing, I was told I would soon receive a verdict. As the time drew near, TianShi was still in America. Lawyer Liu would be my sole representation and as I thought of all his words in an attempt to persuade me into entering a guilty plea, I began to read my indictment again. I needed to reread notes I had previously taken about my case as I recalled everything I heard at trial months ago. Thinking of everything that had been done wrong with my case, I reflected on how I had been treated for my entire stay in China. I wrote my closing statement and I memorized every word I had written. I knew every person with ears would have to agree with each word recited and I thanked God as I thought about spending my last nights in the cage in which I had been held. I would never be forced to witness sexual activities between men take place 50 feet away from me again. I would never be forced to hand wash and hang dry my underwear or blanket again. I would never have to smell the human excrement of 30 different people piled on top of one another ever again. I would no longer be worried if the man laying next to me would try to kill me as I slept, because I would soon be living my life as a free man.

After being picked up early in the morning, driven to the courthouse, and escorted to one of the holding cells, I wholeheartedly expected to be free within a few hours' time. I didn't expect to ever go back to prison so like my last trip, I took the things of most importance with me to the courthouse. I was excited to finally have my hardships come to a close. I didn't get to eat breakfast because I was picked up by the court officers a lot earlier than I expected but while sitting inside the holding cell alone with my hands restrained in front of me, I was brought a few slices of bread to eat. It felt like I had been waiting for days but after three hours, the time had come for me to go up to the courtroom.

Before the trial, I was first escorted to another holding cell which resembled a waiting room. It was only about 60 yards away from the courtroom's doors. The same doors that I would soon enter and hear my fate. Confidently I waited but before I was to walk to the courtroom, 6 officers entered the waiting room along with the judge who visited me every month. She had come with her translator to have a conversation with me. There are now eight people within the waiting room, all staring and standing up over me. The judge who's standing directly in front of me is speaking with the translator who is to her left.

“If you plead guilty, you can still be found innocent”, says the translator to open the conversation. “After all the evidence is looked at, you can still be found innocent”

Not only can I not believe these are the first words uttered to me by anyone today but I also can't believe these were her choice of words as I am minutes away from receiving my verdict. The country's government officials are still trying to corner me into saying I'm guilty. After years of being bullied, the Chinese authorities have not only failed to prove I'm guilty but they also refused to tell me so. Those in the position to break my chains or keep me shackled, wanted me to tell them I'm guilty.

“That's not true”, I opposed, “once you say you're guilty, there is no innocence after that!”

The translator then tells the judge what I said and everyone in the room begins to speak amongst themselves. Every officer now looks at me more intently than before. Some with anger in their eyes, some with confusion. Some were completely surprised that in a country where freedom of speech, thinking for oneself, or thinking apart from the masses are frowned upon, I not only disagreed with the country's authority figures, but I also expressed my disdain for the entire criminal and court process.

“All the evidence has been looked at already. And you've been looking at it for years now! There is nothing else! I should have already been found innocent!” I continue to reiterate to her that I should not be imprisoned, I've done nothing besides be attacked and yet I'd spent years of my life waiting for the panel of judges to make the right decision. I was waiting to be released from wrongful imprisonment. I was completely exhausted from years of dealing with the situation and I was ready to go home.

While I engaged in conversation with the judge my handcuffs were so tight that they began to leave bruises on my wrist. I asked for them to be loosened and one of the six officers was told to loosen the restraint on my right wrist. While doing so, another officer who was the furthest away from me rushes to the front and grabs my arm. They're all wearing bulky black gloves but the officer that comes from behind all the others has his gloves turned on. These gloves they're wearing are electric shock taser gloves and as the officer grabs my arm, I feel a sharp surge of pain flow through my entire body. I had just been tased and my body tenses up until he finally decides to release my arm nearly 10 seconds later. I look at him with rage in my eyes, “what the fuck is wrong with you? Why would you come over and fuckin tazze me?” I exclaimed. He tries to act as if he has made a mistake, but I knew he hadn't been walking around the courthouse the entire morning with his gloves already turned on. This officer had intended to harm me. Maybe he didn't like the way I thought and spoke or maybe he didn't like that I was on trial with accusations of harming one of his fellow countrymen. Maybe he simply didn't like black people, but one thing I knew is, he wanted to have part in making me feel more pain than I already had. He turned those gloves on just for me.

I walked into a courtroom full of people. Just like the first time I went to court, there are many familiar faces but I also see many who I don't know. There were many things that differed the second time I showed up to court. The courtroom process was a lot shorter

this time. I described the incident that led to my imprisonment and the video of it was played again, only once. The statements from the witnesses weren't read nor was there any debating back and forth between the prosecution and my defense as my first court date. I am again told which things will be used as evidence in court and just as I assumed there were many things, since they would have been in my favor, weren't used though they should have been, like statements given by true witnesses and a video that TianShi took of the internal landscape of the bar. Instead statements that contradicted everything that occurred in the video were taken into evidence. The Chinese government was trying to build the case completely against me no matter how wrong and untrue it was.

The fact still remained that the two men said they wanted to hurt me and they were on video attempting to do so. It was also a woman who was a victim in my case, hospitalized, severely hurt, with a head injury. Yet my attackers weren't on trial, I was. They didn't receive any charges, only the man who was in fear for his life.

The time had come for me to give my final statement and given all the facts in the case, I no longer felt the need to say everything I had written down. I told the panel of judges that I was attacked and there was nothing I could do to keep myself from being harmed. I expressed that I wanted to leave the bar safely and both my attackers and myself did that. I thanked them for hearing my case, and I thanked my family and my friends for their support. I was done talking. I'd had enough and was done with the emotional roller coaster. I just wanted to go home. Lawyer Liu, to my right, just sat at the table, barely able to utter a word through the entire court proceedings. Unprepared for what was to take place, I knew Lawyer Liu didn't understand just how serious my case was until he walked into a packed courtroom with no standing room and people being forced to stand outside. The second room next door was opened for civilians and equipped with televisions so the proceedings could be followed. That room was filled to capacity as well. The judge begins to speak and the translator states the verdict was about to be read.

"Wendell Lee Brown has been found guilty of intentional injury and sentenced to 4 years" I took a deep breath and thought, *they can't be serious*. But they in fact, were very serious. They refused to free me. The verdict I received was nothing like I thought it should or would be. They really told me I was guilty and I am now a convicted felon. From the gasps for air and crying I heard coming from behind me, I wasn't the only person who didn't expect to hear these words. The judge's next words were a question, "Will you appeal the verdict?"

"Yes", I responded, "I will appeal immediately."

I was escorted back to the same waiting room that I was just tazed in. I sat there still in disbelief thinking about what had just occurred. The judge walked in to talk to me again. When I spoke to the judge, I made sure to emphasize that everything about this entire process had been wrong and by giving me a guilty verdict, they made a terrible and wrong decision.

"If you don't appeal the decision, you can possibly be released early on good behavior."

These were the first words that were translated to me from the judge and I was appalled that after everything I had just expressed about how amiss my entire two years had been, and how innocent I was, yet the first thing she had to say was they wanted me to accept the guilty verdict. Nothing they said to me would convince me not to appeal the verdict I'd just received, even being told I could be released early.

"I've had good behavior the entire time I've been imprisoned. I've been wearing these handcuffs entirely too long and for no legitimate reason at all. I shouldn't have been arrested. I should be getting released now."

I was told my sister had traveled to China and wanted to see me. Since she had traveled so far, the Chinese officials were going to allow us 10 minutes to speak before my monthly 15-minute meeting with the embassy. I was escorted back to the courtroom where I waited for her to be brought in. Soon, there were two Chinese men, one in a police uniform and the other in a suit, along with a black woman entering the room. I knew exactly who this said sister was who walked towards me even though it was my first time ever meeting her. I smiled as she approached but she began to cry

"I've failed you! I've failed you!", she said. It was my sister Tracy who had not only been communicating with me through letters for nearly a year but had also been working very closely with my family advocating for me on both continents. She was solely responsible for seeking out and sending the lawyer that changed my life to my aid. I asked if I could hug my sister as she cried to console her, but I was told physical contact was forbidden. Distraught, she repeated over and over that she had failed me and with a warm smile and a calm voice I stated,

"you didn't fail, for one second, you did amazing! You went above and beyond what anyone could have asked of you Sis! You're the real MVP! But this is how it was supposed to happen, God knows exactly what he's doing and he makes no mistakes! Trust me, and more importantly, trust God, everything is going to be ok. We're going to get through this."

Tracy had been working so hard on my behalf and her entire heart wanted my pain to end. She wanted my family's pain to end. She, just as I, was confident that the judges over my case after years of waiting would finally render the correct verdict. It was my job to comfort her, just as her letters had done for me. It was my turn to give her a confidence booster, reassuring her that we were taking all the right steps and making all the necessary decisions for this situation to come to the correct ending. Her tears now begin to subside, so I asked how she had been and how everyone else was doing? I was told that both our families were doing well but ever so often Tracy would express how sorry she was. I pleaded with her, telling her not to worry and had to again reiterate that everything was OK.

"I will appeal this verdict" I stated, "and we will get through this because the right decision will be made. We have nothing to worry about Sis. I promise. There is no way I'm staying here for 4 years. God got us!" Tracy then asked, how I was doing and how I was holding up? I told her "I'm fine, just ready to be finished with this treatment I'm receiving. We have to

keep pressing forward. We have to keep working and keep believing. Faith and works Sis, faith and works.”

Our time was ending and I greatly wanted to make sure she knew just how thankful I was for everything she had been doing. I loved my sister as we had grown close through the letters we had been sharing. I also wanted her to make sure everyone else knew I appreciated them and loved them as well. I asked her to send my love to all those who had come to support physically and those who were lifting me up in prayer. I especially wanted her to tell my family that I loved them and that I was strong and no matter how hard the Chinese officials tried to see me weak and broken, it couldn't be done. I wanted to strengthen her and everyone she would talk to when we were no longer in each other's presence. I asked again if I could give my sister a hug but I was told no for a second time. All I could do was look into her eyes so she could see and feel the sincerity in which I said these things.

After my sister Tracy was escorted out of the empty courtroom, the American Embassy personnel were escorted in for our monthly meeting. They seemed extremely down as they approached me and when I asked why, I was told it was the verdict I'd just received that had everyone a bit emotional. They proceeded to tell me that they nor any of the people present expected to hear that outcome. They began to speak about the amount of support for me and how people were bringing cards, letters, and even books to express their love and willingness to help any way they could. Like always, I was super excited to receive each card, letter, book, and photo. The first round in the translation process started right there by the Chinese officials, and my letters, pictures, and books were passed around between each person. Everything but one magazine and one letter made it through. The letter that didn't make it through was from a childhood friend who saw my mother and case on television, and wanted me to know he and his family were praying for me and wanted me to stay strong. I asked, “Why is it not ok for me to receive all my letters?” I was told because my case couldn't be spoken about and though nothing was actually said about my case in the letter it referenced it and my family being on television. Of the reading material that didn't pass the first round of screening, a business magazine that had information concerning international subjects with a portion that simply mentioned China's name. I couldn't believe that these things were taken away from me when neither one said anything negative about my case nor the country in which I was being held, yet these things were handed back to the American Embassy officials.

Back in America, my mother's home was full of family and friends who had already gotten news of the verdict. They had taken the news extremely hard but were also ready to get back to work for the appeal process. I and everyone else was expecting to hear the judge give me an innocent verdict, but instead everyone was departing feeling sad because I would not be able to hug and celebrate with them just yet. The embassy representatives swore they would continue to do everything in their power to help the situation and though I greatly appreciated everything they had been doing for me, I knew there was very little they could do.

I informed the Embassy about the judge approaching me about not appealing the guilty verdict I had just received. They all knew I planned to appeal the moment I was told I wouldn't be freed. This didn't surprise the American government representatives and I was told they would start to speak with my lawyers and my family about the next steps for the appeal process. I was still trying to wrap my mind around the fact that I had been in there for almost two years and they still wanted me to stay for two more. Everything I'd been experiencing with the Chinese justice system was completely wrong and I couldn't believe I was being railroaded. I was told by the Embassy that China had a 99% conviction rate that they were extremely proud of and I began to see exactly how they kept that number so high. You were forced to plead guilty and even those who truly were innocent were guilty in China. But, I was in that 1%.

During the court proceedings the prosecution was extremely silent this day. They weren't as animated as the first time in court and I wondered if they were upset I wasn't sentenced to the decade they originally asked for. I was hurting, but I was strong. I was faithful because I knew God had the final say. He would always get me through any difficulties I faced so I had to make sure I was smiling, sending love through jokes, memories and anything else that would uplift my family back home. Though they were not hurting as much as I was hurting, the entire situation was hard for them and some days I felt it may have been harder on them than it was on me. To know I'm stranded on an island, to have no knowledge of what's happening with or to me, and to not have the ability to help me. They too were in pain.

After my court date, Tracy was being harassed. The Chinese government made a copy of her passport before allowing her to see me and began to track and follow her. They had been seen visiting and speaking with people at her job and even where she stayed. Her home had even been entered and searched while she was away. I felt terrible because I was the reason she was experiencing these difficulties. The love and support for me had now endangered her safety and life. Tracy was soon forced to return to America for a while until things smoothed over. After all the hard work she had done on my behalf, I never wanted any harm to come to her or anyone else. As I pictured her frightened, being forced out of her home, and chased by Chinese authorities, my heart began to ache.

Chapter Seventeen

GUILTY UNTIL PROVEN INNOCENT

I would like to add, I'm innocent. I am not guilty.

-Huey P. Newton

My two-year mark was fast approaching as I prepared to go through the appeal process. I wondered how long this process would take because it was nearly a year between each of my court dates. TianShi finally made her way back to China from America and I was so excited to see and talk to her. While in America, TianShi had met my family and many of the people who were helping bring awareness to my case. They began discussing more ways to ensure I receive freedom earlier than the 4 year verdict I received from the judge. With the arrival of TianShi, Lawyer Liu's services were no longer needed. He was relieved of duty and I informed TianShi how often Lawyer Liu tried to convince me to enter a plea of guilt. She was already aware of everything that was taking place with me since her departure and she applauded my strength and resolve as I remained firm on innocence.

I began to dig deeper within myself asking God for more strength because I was now appealing a verdict given by a justice system and government that shunned and frowned upon independence of thought. In their eyes I was still disrespecting their country by not only refusing to believe I was guilty but by also opposing the guilty verdict.

Football helped me many days of my life and so much more than I could have imagined while being on 24-hour lockdown. The game of football helped with becoming mentally tough. It taught me to push myself past my limits, to never accept defeat, and to keep a never die mindset. I was inspired to live and not die every single day. Some days were harder than others and when those occurred, I spoke to myself to pick myself up. I told myself it was the 4th quarter. I told myself that all I needed to do was make One More Play to win the game. I knew I was close to winning the game and losing was not an option.

"One more stop! One more stop! Make a play! Make a play! You got it! You got it!!"

These were some of the same things I said to myself when on the football field if the defense needed to get the ball back for our offense, but the outcome of this game wasn't for a win or a loss, it was life or death.

It still baffled me that the Chinese Government truly expected people to “believe what I tell you! Do what I tell you! Take what I give you and ask no questions!” These were things I just could not and would not do. It wasn’t just my education background and experiences that wouldn’t allow me to do as they did in China, my heart and mind couldn’t convince me that I deserved guilt. As the appeal process went underway, a new group of judges were assigned to my case. It went up a level within the criminal justice process. The new panel of judges came to visit me in order to record an interrogation about the details of the night that landed me in prison and for me to sign the necessary paperwork as my case had moved up from Intermediate People’s Court to The Higher People’s Court. One of the judges, a man, could speak some English but the three of them still came with translators. As I entered the room, the English-speaking judge asked the officer who was handcuffing me to the desk what book was I carrying and why had I left my cell with it? He then asked me the same in English. I responded, “it’s my Bible.” The look on his face implied that He didn’t know what a Bible was so I said “God’s Book” in Chinese. He laughed and asked, “do you think God can save you?” This wasn’t the first time I was laughed at or disrespected for believing in an unseen power greater than myself. I looked into his eyes and said “yes” as he continued to laugh in my face. The officers who escorted me to be interrogated by the new panel of judges told them I had my Bible with me at all times. Whether I was in or out of my cell, it was like the book never left my hands. After getting more information, he continued in laughter and proceeded to tell me that my Bible was just some pointless book. To some people that may have been true, but for me, my bible filled me with confirmation, control, peace, and power. On a daily basis it was my protection. It strengthened me not just as an individual but consistently strengthened my relationship with God. It was my sword and shield, essential to my survival.

Through conversations with many Chinese people, I found that it was common for people in China to not believe in God. Though I knew there were many people in the world who didn’t believe in God, I had never heard anyone with my own two ears say they were nonbelievers and now for the first time in my life I was surrounded by people who outwardly expressed their disbelief in any higher power. Chinese people were raised to believe in their government and money, and that’s where the list stops. Money was God! I saw that daily while free and while locked up. Money is the number one most important thing on the planet to Chinese people and With it, there was nothing you wouldn’t have excess to. They believed in that more than the government they were forced to believe in and abide by. Though it’s the same everywhere in the world, I’d never seen or been in a place where NOTHING ELSE matters.

Each time I met with the appeal judges I continued to express my concern with how my case had been handled, and Each time I asked the judges if they read the letters I wrote addressed to those who first group judged my case resulting in a guilty verdict. This was extremely important because not only did these letters speak on the facts of my case, and the Chinese law, but also questioned what the police, judges, and government officials considered right and wrong. These letters were extremely important because it was the closest I could come to speaking for myself. I spoke my mind but chose not to do so with hostility and disrespect. I did so eloquently, and signed each letter “humbly and

respectfully spoken". Each time I wrote "humbly and respectfully" before my signature, I laughed because it felt so good to speak freely to those who were in the position to change what was happening to me and to a certain extent I did so arrogantly and disrespectfully but my words were also tasteful. They were the most pleasant and professional tongue lashes on paper. I was told that my letters had been read by all those responsible for judging my case during the appeal process. I still stressed their importance because these letters were filled with 100% truth and contained 100% facts.

While meeting with my lawyer TianShi, I finally got knowledge and information on who the 2 men that attacked me were. International Jack always joked about my attackers being the nephews of China's president because no one had ever seen or heard of a fight ending with someone staying locked away for multiple years with no verdict, nor the other party demanding such a high amount of money for release. TianShi told me she found out one of the two men had high political and government ties, which would explain the amount of time I had spent behind bars before I received a verdict. Moreso it also explained why no one could understand how, with all the evidence in my favor, I was still being held. Held for ransom.

TianShi would meet with PeiChen's lawyer, and the judges in order to reach an agreement when it comes to paying the ransom for me to be released. My lawyer would be frightened by the actions of my attacker during this meeting as he began to disrespect, yell, and curse at the judges. He also began asking what their names were and saying they would soon lose their jobs for what they were doing to him. PeiChen made it clear that he knew people who held a very high position and they would suffer great consequences because they were considering siding with justice. PeiChen had attacked another man, sent a woman to the hospital, and he had been blatantly wrong in the whole matter. The appeal judges were beginning to see the matter from the eyes of the attacked, from the eyes of the man imprisoned. PeiChen felt he could disrespect and harm others with no remorse or punishment. Just like I, he felt he had done no wrong.

After being disrespected by PeiChen, my lawyer TianShi engaged in a bit of conversation with one of the judges. She learned this was not the first time he had attacked someone and this came as no surprise to me. I knew he had become accustomed to attacking and hurting others because of how quickly he reached to pick up that beer bottle by the neck to throw at me. I knew it because of how quickly his friend rushed forward to stab me. These guys had much practice in situations like the one we shared that night. TianShi said the meeting was short because nothing could be accomplished. My attacker had become so unruly he had to be forcefully removed from the building, all while kicking and screaming. When I asked about his appearance at the meeting, I also wasn't surprised to hear TianShi say, "his face had no scars and he had 2 fully functioning eyes."

The man who supposedly had surgery to get an eye removed from his skull was in front of my lawyer with no facial scars and 2 eyes. I now knew with the same certainty that everyone else involved in my case knew, I'd been held captive for a crime I did not commit, and myself and TianShi, for the first time, were about to get our chance to meet together with the judges. Anytime I previously met with a judge, it was with the embassy visiting or

with the judges alone. This was the first time I would come to a meeting with my lawyer to discuss my case. After being called out of my cell, I entered the interrogation room and on the other side of the bars stood my lawyer, two of the three judges over my case, and a translator. I was asked to relive those events once more but for the first time since my initial interrogations, everything would be recorded on video. Once the camera was turned off, a meeting persisted. My lawyer begins to speak with the judges and though they had met many times prior, this was the first time I was present. This particular meeting was all about coming to an agreement that would be a “fair deal” for my release. Everything is bargained for in China and now, my lawyer was bargaining for my life. TianShi was trying to figure out how to get me released from a country that had become so accustomed to imposing their will on the less fortunate.

I was paying for justice to be served yet everyone felt I should be paying more. I had already paid with my life but spending over two years wrongfully behind bars was not enough payment. My attackers and the judges still felt without monetary compensation, I was unworthy of freedom.

This was only the second time I was able to watch TianShi speak on my behalf. Her energy was always different when I spoke to her and to see her speak to those over my case was a beautiful sight. I was greatly impressed Each time I watched the passion in which she spoke, I felt the love, care, and concern she had for me. While speaking on my behalf in court, she only had my case for one month. I was so proud to say that she was my lawyer but now she was my representation for more than a year. We now had a better rapport and with constant communication between her and my family, she had become more like family which led to TianShi becoming emotionally attached to me. And all of us, together, were fighting for justice. I could see it over and over again as she spoke with the judges. Firm and intent on making direct eye contact. Unwilling to be stepped on nor allow the Chinese Government to keep me locked away forever. She risked her profession and life for me. Fighting so hard, opposing her government and countrymen for me, speaking on my behalf in a language I could not.

In order for me to be free, I had to do many things. The first thing I had to do was write a letter apologizing to both men who attacked me. The second was to record a video apologizing. The third was to pay compensation to the men. The 4th was what the Chinese officials wanted me to do from the moment I entered their custody. They still wanted me to confess to some type of crime and say I had broken the law. Pleading guilty is where I continued to draw the line. “I will apologize and I said I would agree to pay the men, but why am I still talking about pleading guilty? You have already told me I was guilty.”

My apology was simple, “I’m sorry all this happened. I wish we’d never seen each other and been involved in any incident at all. I wish you all the best of luck in the future.” Deep in my heart I wanted to say “I’m sorry you and your friend felt like it was ok to attack people and I’m sorry that meeting you has kept me locked away for years. I pray we never cross paths again.”

I was told I would be released immediately after I'd done everything they asked, but the main component to my release was paying the plaintiff. I had already done everything else asked of me up to this point and my family had now raised enough money to compensate my attacker. Though PeiChen was being paid for attacking me, Lawyer TianShi informed me he was still extremely upset because he wanted more money than what had been negotiated upon. He wanted to receive nothing short of \$300,000 and felt the pain he had caused my family and I was not enough. He planned to extract every dollar he possibly could. PeiChen wanted to rob us blind and despite all the problems with the plaintiff, an agreement for a price was reached. I signed the necessary paperwork and after the full amount of \$50,000 was received, the judges said I was to be processed and released soon after. Days later TianShi came to visit me and said I still had to go to court because I decided to appeal the verdict. So instead of being released immediately, I would be released from court. It didn't take long for the new court date to be set and just like every other court date, I was confident. I had done everything asked and the judges said it was all ending now. I was ready for what I knew would be freedom.

I was transported to the courthouse early that morning and I took everything I wanted to leave the country with me. Every letter and photo sent to me, every dream I saw at night, and every plan I had written down was put in my hooded sweatshirt pocket. I wore the same thing each time I left the facility and this time, I knew I wasn't coming back. Unlike the other times I went to the court, I was able to see and talk to my lawyer prior to being escorted into the courtroom. I was even allowed to give her a hug and thank her for everything she had done for me. The judges disliked the sweatshirt I had worn. I didn't know if it was the bulge of the front pocket, or the lack of sleeves on the shirt, or the fact that it said "Blessed" across the chest. For whichever reason, I was told to take it off. I didn't understand why but out of respect I listened and my sweatshirt along with everything inside it was given to my lawyer. She was allowed to hold it for me until the court proceedings had concluded.

Everyone had already gone inside and I'm the last to enter the courtroom. This time was different from all my other court appearances because it was an extremely quick process. There was no listening to the prosecution. No listening to lawyers. No explaining my side of the story. No verbal defending nor debating. It was simply receiving a judgment.

"Guilty", one of the three judges said. "Sentence reduced to 3 years with time served".

When I heard guilty and three years, the first emotion I felt was extreme sorrow. I then felt anger and couldn't believe I had been deceived. After everything I had done, written letters, video recorded apologies, my family even came up with all the money, yet they still got it wrong. After all the time I had already spent incarcerated, being told I would go home, and I still could not. I thought I had finally done it all correctly, but no.

As I am led outside the courtroom, the hallway is full of smiling faces, some are friends and some are American Government officials. I am escorted down to the basement

of the courthouse, passing the holding cells. The male judge who when we met initially laughed at my Bible walked past, looked at me and simply said “just bad luck.”

Downstairs in a meeting area, TianShi was sitting with three officers standing behind her. With my hands still restrained in front of me, I sat in a chair next to her. This meeting room was bigger than any other I had ever been in and on the other side of the bulletproof glass was an officer, one of the two female judges, and her translator. We began to talk and I'm so hurt that my emotions are running wild.

“It's wrong what I've been experiencing and I can't believe I'm still not going home.” I state, “I did everything you asked me to do. You told me I could go free but I'm still wearing handcuffs and conversing behind this glass.” My feelings are hurt and as I continue to express myself, tears begin to fall.

“You just told me and the entire world that those men were completely right by hurting people because they received no punishment, and I, the man that has done nothing but be attacked, is still incarcerated. Why can't you just get it right?”

The judge is now telling me the prison I will be transferred to is much better than the facility I have been held in for 2 years. I can't believe they're actually trying to convince me to be happy and want me to be excited about imprisonment. I'm told I have 10 months left and during that time, I will be able to make phone calls to my family. “As soon as you arrive at the prison, you'll finally be able to receive visits from family and friends” says the judge, then I hear the translator say, “the time would go fast. You will be home soon.”

My unjust punishment continues and TianShi attempts to calm me down saying, “everything is OK. It's almost over and you'll be celebrating with your family soon.” She then notifies me that she had been allowed to set up my first phone call to my family in over 2 years. I hear her speaking but I'm still talking and pleading with the judge about how bad I just want to be free. TianShi then says the phone is about to ring and I've been given 10 minutes to FaceTime with my family. I began to gather myself mentally as I prepared for the FaceTime call by wiping the tears from my face. I had to put strength and courage in my eyes and heart, I'm handed one of two phones TianShi held. As it starts ringing my heart starts to beat fast and my breathing speeds up as well. The first thing I see is my beautiful mother's smile with my brother just over her shoulder smiling as well. Just that image alone after years of pain and uncertainty filled me with so much joy. Then I hear a roar of laughs, words, and praise from the background. It sounded like a party had just started as everyone present was so excited to hear from and see me. I was happy to finally see them but as we spoke from the basement of the courthouse, the cellular device's signal was very poor and the connection weak, so the camera froze. It froze on the two smiling faces I missed so dearly. Though the video was malfunctioning the audio worked perfectly and I heard the voices of many friends and family members in the background who had all come to be by my mother's side and support us. I was so thankful to finally hear their voices and see their faces, I thanked God. I too smiled, in relief knowing that they were doing well. It took two years to have communication that was greater than letters and as I spoke to nearly everyone in the house as I heard voices and acknowledged every voice I

could recognize. The phone was passed around the room which allowed me to speak directly to a few people. We joked and laughed, spoke about how everybody was doing, and how amazing it felt to interact with them this way after waiting so long to do so.

I had just received terrible news, but I saw a glimpse of light that was inevitable to see. Due to their smiling faces and their laughter I knew they were doing just fine and that I would also be fine. I continued to let everyone know I loved and missed them dearly and I told them to be sure to stay strong, faithful, and prayed up, because we would all be together very soon. It seemed like only seconds had passed before I was being told it was time to end the call with my family so I could be escorted away from the courthouse and back to 24-hour lockdown. “Wow” I exclaimed as I headed back to the police van. “I love my family so much.” I waited a long time to share that moment with them and those were the best 10 minutes of my life yet it felt like only 10 seconds. That phone call to my family was the greatest and purest exchange of love that one could possibly be a part of. “Damn I can’t wait to see and hug them.”

I settled down on the ride back to the jail and I began to put everything in perspective before I even set foot inside the facility. Though I’d hoped to never see the walls of the cell I was soon to enter again, I couldn’t help but think about how they got it wrong, again. I then thought, in the eyes of the Chinese Government this was completely right. They never intended to release me. The plan was to keep me for as long as they possibly could but God was sending so many people to my aid that I was almost home. I knew God was still granting me grace and Favor as the years went from 10 to 4, then from 4 to 3. I wanted my unjust punishment to end faster and though I had been told I would be leaving soon, 10 months didn’t feel like soon enough. It still didn’t feel right and that was because it wasn’t. There was no way I could be happy with that judgment. I just couldn’t bring myself to accept it. “I’m innocent. I should not still be here”, I said to myself. It was time for me to get my case to an even higher court. “I’m appealing, again.”

Chapter Eighteen

MY WINGS AREN'T BROKEN

The road to freedom is via the cross.

-Chief Albert Luthuli

It's dark and I am alone walking outside a huge building. I don't recognize the building and when I notice bars of steel on the windows I see, I know I've never seen nor been to this place before. I have absolutely no idea where I am. I continue to walk, trying to think of where I could possibly be, I hear a deep voice say "the Eagle has landed!" In an instant I'm walking through this unfamiliar building and I begin to think maybe I'm a prisoner, because I feel restricted in where I can go. It wasn't until I saw a hallway full of prison cells did I know where I was. I'm walking down the hallway and looking into each cell; I wake up.

The day seemed just like any other in jail when I woke up from that dream, and in it I was in a facility walking past prison cells, but it looked like nothing I was currently in. After breakfast while going through my morning routine, multiple officers come to my cell and tell me to grab my things because I was being transferred. I'm forced to hurry to collect my belongings in order to be transported and I begin to think maybe it's the same building I just dreamt about. The officers begin to rush me even more saying "Hurry! Hurry! Let's Go!" in Chinese. As I'm packing all the things, I thought about how I would never go through this process again because I would be going home from the next facility. I wouldn't want or need to take anything but the clothes I had on my back and the same things I took each time I left the jail, my letters and pictures. I grabbed all my clothes, a few of my blankets along with my bible, letters and pictures. Pretty much everything I possessed was coming with me to prison. The only things I left behind were the majority of my reading material. I was shoved out of the cell, afterwards I was handcuffed and led to an area where officers met with one another. Officers are smoking cigarettes, drinking coffee, and talking amongst each other then I am hurried through the area and told to sign paperwork. This area was located directly across from the room where the video monitors were located and there were multiple officers both sitting and standing watching the many tv screens. I was told to sign some papers, then given 1100 RMB, which was the amount of money I had left

to buy things while inside. An envelope was then placed inside my pocket and I'm escorted to the police van with all my belongings tied up within one of my blankets, including the signed paperwork concerning my transfer to a different facility. I couldn't read my paperwork because it was in Chinese but I know where i'm headed. I set off to prison.

After over an hour of riding in the back of the police van, we pulled into a parking lot facing a huge building. It looks like an office building but there are huge steel doors that have to be passed through to enter. I have a bit of an idea what's behind those steel doors and the driver and passenger exit the parked van with a manila folder to walk towards one of the entrances of the building. I quickly lost sight of them, leaving myself and the two officers who rode in the back inside of the van with me. After 30 minutes of listening to the two officers talk amongst themselves about food, family, and even basketball, the other two officers come back and open the van's sliding door. One officer exits then I am told to exit. The second officer following me has my stuffed blanket in his hands. I am then escorted nearly 100 yards to the huge set of steel doors. I was about to find out with certainty what was behind those steel doors. There were two officers on each side of me with 2 cameras pointed down on us and guards at the top of the building with guns walking around. My heart began to beat, exceedingly fast. "I'm really a convicted felon," I said, as I shook my head in disbelief.

The big steel doors slide apart and standing on the other side are three officers. Two are holding assault rifles wearing military uniforms looking as if they are guarding the one in the middle who is standing without a gun in his hand. He is dressed in the same police uniform as those who drove me to the prison. The steel doors slide closed and directly to my right is a small room with tv monitors inside. There are two officers inside the small surveillance room and one exits to search through my blanket. "Come" is the only word said as I grab my things and follow the officers through another set of steel doors. When they open, I see even bigger buildings than the ones outside. Majority of the buildings are completely identical except for four of them. I am uncuffed and escorted by the one officer with his security. As I walk along, I think it looks as if I have just walked onto a college campus, but there are no students carrying books, only prisoners in handcuffs. Those who are not in handcuffs are marching around as if they're preparing for war. I quickly noticed that everyone there wore uniforms and only three of them existed on the entire campus. The basic blue police uniform, the army fatigue military uniform, and the prisoner uniform which was blue pants and blue button up shirt, with small blue and white boxes going down each side. Each building is gated and separated from all the others and after passing 8 different buildings, I am stopped at the gate of one. The four-story L shaped building is about 50 yards away directly in front of me. I see a huge group of inmates in their uniforms marching back and forth while others stand off to the side, watching. The gate automatically opens and while carrying my blanket filled with all my personal belongings, myself and the officer in the police uniform walk through the yard as the military personel turn and walk in another direction.

I walk past those marching towards 4 officers and inmates standing at the top of the building's steps. To my right, I noticed a huge opening in the building that a truck could be driven through and inside that opening were other inmates standing and sitting at tables

talking. I am now standing at the bottom of three stairs of another entrance while the officers stood at the doors of the building talking amongst each other. The inmates that were marching are now standing at attention while those who were just standing around continued to do so but they were all now standing around me. I noticed that a few of the inmates that were near me were foreigners. This was my first time seeing any other foreigners that were not from the embassy or at court. I had only been around Chinese inmates for 2 years and I expected to continue after being transferred. The officer who escorted me to this building with the two military personnel spoke English and his first words in English to me were a translation of what the other officers were saying. I'm told to put my things down and take every article of clothing I am wearing off. It's extremely cold outside and though I'm not being touched, I'm still being examined by every person that's present. As I stood there completely naked in the cold, my belongings were being ransacked by inmates at the officers approval. The officers then take my blankets and all my clothes that I brought with me. My coat, shirts, hoodies and sweatpants were all confiscated and as I put my underwear back on, I was given two sets of prison uniforms and told to put one of them on now. I'm trying to figure out how to stay warm in the cold weather if all of my clothing had been taken in exchange for my thin prison uniforms. "How do I keep warm?", I asked the English-speaking officer. I am then told I can keep a pair of sweatpants and two shirts that don't have a hood on them. I would be allowed to wear them under my uniform. I am glad I asked this because had I not, that information would not have been given to me and I would have been freezing cold every day. I soon noticed some inmates were wearing coats that look exactly like the prison uniform shirts and pants. So I asked, "Will I be given one of those too?"

I am fully dressed again wearing a sweatsuit under my blue inmate uniform. I am then told to stand in one spot while some inmates continue to march, some clean the inside of the building and others still stand around talking. After about 30 minutes of standing, I am called by an officer to go inside the building. Every inmate had a bald head and a shaved face and I was told that having hair on my head and face was against the prison rules. I informed the officer that I had no problem with keeping a shaved head but I kept a beard because of my religion and I haven't cut it in years, even prior to being imprisoned. Though I was told the Chinese Government and prison system respected other nationalities, religions, and the different belief systems of foreigners, it didn't matter because both my head and face were shaved.

Upset, I stood in the same place I did before I was called inside. As I felt myself getting angry about having my beard cut off my face, I thought about where I was and how I got there. "Of course, they don't care about your beard." I said to myself, "Their justice system is flawed and there are no human rights laws. Any Chinese official can be bought, and they send you to prison when you're clearly innocent. They don't care about anything, especially your facial hair. Stop tripping, it's only hair and it grows back. You have 10 months left until you're a free man. 10 MONTHS! You got this."

For some odd reason, I wasn't allowed to talk to any of the foreigners and they too were told not to speak to me. As I stood in the spot I was told not to move from, many of the foreigners would walk past and acknowledge me with eye contact or a simple nod. A

horn blows and I see every inmate going inside the building and I was told which way to go. I along with every other inmate go up the stairs, some are going to the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd floor, but I am led to the 4th. Once on the floor every inmate goes inside their cells and after I pass 4 different cells, I am told cell number 405 is where I will stay. The cell has six bunk beds, three on each side of the cell. The rear of the cell has shelves on both sides just before the sink which is to the left, across from two holes in the floor to relieve ourselves. There were two showerheads above the two toilets. There was also a window that faced the next building on the back wall and I was able to see inmates in that building walking the halls and entering their cells also. When the bed that I would be sleeping at is shown to me, I was given prison sheets, pillowcase and blanket. I was given the last lower bunk on the left-hand side of the cell. The sheets, pillowcase, and blanket looked exactly like the prison uniforms; blue with a single line of blue and white squares. The bunk beds were a gray metal frame with a thin flat sheet of wood for me to lay on. I planned to ask if I could get some of the things I brought with me to make sleeping on the wooden sheet a bit more comfortable. I needed clothing to stuff my pillowcase with and a blanket to put on top of the wood pallet, under the sheet to add a bit of cushion to the piece of wood. There was also a particular way in which each inmate had to fold their blanket and place it on the bed each day. I was taught to fold my blanket and if an inmate failed to fold his blanket correctly or make his bed, he received some type of punishment from the police.

I'm told to stand near my bed while those who had already been in prison were able to sit down and relax. Everyone who stood were those who were outside marching and as I stood and looked around, I noticed the bars of the cell began to close. A lone inmate whose bunk was right in front of the cell's entrance is lying in bed and after an hour of standing in silence, the bars to the cell open and I see inmates running and rushing down the hall. I wondered why and when I looked down the hall, I saw a line had formed at a machine in the hallway. It's a hot water machine, and there was one on every floor and every inmate went there to fill up their water bottles with hot water to drink before it was time to go back downstairs to do more marching and chores. Afterwards everyone formed another line and once everyone was accounted for, we all went downstairs and back outside.

I stood in the same place for hours watching others march. No one had spoken to me while I stood and I noticed a few inmates wearing orange vests over their blue inmate uniforms. It seemed as if those wearing orange vests had more freedom and access within the facility than any of the other inmates. A bell rings that causes the inmates who were marching to sit on small chairs outside, while the others who were inside came out to walk around freely and talk. It seemed like everyone was given a break from their chores but I was told to continue standing. Soon everyone began to line up outside and they all began to sing a song in unison before being counted to enter the inside of the building. It was time for dinner and I was asked if there was anything I didn't eat. In Chinese I said, "I don't eat pork" and I was given two bowls and a pair of chopsticks. As the line I stood in moved, a square of white rice was thrown into my bowl. My second bowl was filled with cabbage from a huge pot. I had become very familiar with this meal because I had eaten it almost daily for the past two years. I didn't expect anything other than rice and cabbage to begin with. I'm told to sit at a table with all Chinese inmates while the other foreigners sat at a

table together and soon an inmate approaches with a white container with an orange liquid dripping from it. I didn't know what it could be and I knew the food selection could get extremely weird in China. I thanked him and started to open it wondering what could be inside to eat.

Sliced carrots, tofu, a wing, and chicken filled the white container and using my chopsticks, I began picking up the contents of the container and eating them. Besides the packets of chicken feet I purchased to eat in the other facility, this was the first time in two years I had real chicken. The food smelled and tasted a lot better than the last place I was in but I was shocked to find a whole chicken head, with beak and all inside the container. I had a harder time trying to eat in the new facility because I was now using chopsticks where I once had a spoon. I didn't know how to eat with chopsticks but I watched the others around me, how they held and used theirs. Though I tried hard, eating with chopsticks was frustrating. I had the best food in years in front of me but I couldn't grab and eat as much as I wanted with each bite. I asked a passing officer if I could get a spoon but was told no because spoons were not allowed. "You can only eat with chopsticks." I didn't understand how spoons could be forbidden when in my eyes, I had just been given two knives instead of a spoon. I felt the police officers had just put weapons in the possession of every inmate in prison and though these were the thoughts of a man who had only been there for a few hours, I began to think. "I can't be the only one in this prison thinking I have been given a knife."

The Chinese inmates laughed as they watched me attempt to eat with the chopsticks. They knew I wanted to use a spoon instead so one of the inmates who wore an orange vest told me he would get me a spoon tomorrow and not to worry. I didn't really understand how he, an inmate, could get me a spoon, but an officer couldn't. I just waited to see what would happen. Once I had eaten everything but the chicken's head from inside the box, one of the Chinese inmates asked if he could have the chicken head to eat. I initially thought of the scene in the movie *Life* when an inmate asked for Claude's cornbread and what happened to Ray because of it, but I gladly handed the container over to the inmate.

After dinner everyone was forced to sit down to watch the daily news. Quickly, I found out that watching the news was a religion within a Chinese prison no matter the location. After the news ended I saw everyone lining up holding buckets in their hands. There was a tank with wheels that was filled with hot water and inmates that lined up had already retrieved their buckets from the area where the inmates who were responsible for filling up each bucket with water left them. The buckets had the name or number of the inmate in which the bucket belonged. These buckets had to be purchased if you wanted hot water to wash because just like the last facility I was locked away in, there were no hot water showers. Once upstairs, everybody could pretty much do what they wanted until the cells were locked except those who were new arrivals like myself. I was among those who couldn't do anything and though we were in different cells we were all told to stand next to our bunks. Everyone was studying a list of rules that had been given to each inmate, I had yet to receive them because I couldn't read Chinese and a translation of these rules were needed. The other inmates were allowed to go into the first room on the floor. This was the

game room and inmates would grab their small chairs, and enter the room to play chess, cards, gamble, watch television and eat snacks. At the first facility the officers had control of the tv and whatever was being shown is what we were forced to watch, but in the new facility the orange vest inmates who were the leaders put on a tv series or a movie. They enjoyed the evening while myself and others who were fairly new to the prison continued to stand until it was time to be shut into our cells.

Inmates were allowed to walk the halls but it was against the rules to travel to any other floor or go into a cell that was not your own. On each floor every cell had at least one inmate within it that wore an orange vest. They would be in charge of ensuring everything in the cell was done right and when the bars of the cell finally closed for the night, I began to do my push-ups and sit ups. The leader within my cell said I couldn't do any physical activity within the cell. I acted as if I didn't understand what he was saying and continued doing my pushups. Another person within my cell who was from Thailand spoke English and told me that the guy was telling me I couldn't workout. I told him I needed to hear that from an officer, and continued. After I finished my daily 500 pushups and 1000 sit-ups, I took a cold shower and laid down for sleep.

The next morning, the Chinese national anthem woke me up and the inmates began to sweep and mop the cell and hall in front of our cell. Cleaning jobs had been assigned to inmates in the cell, someone was responsible for taking out the trash, while another cleaned the windows and the bars, and other chores. Once all these things were done along with the proper folding of the blanket on each bed, everyone took to their personal hygiene routines before getting in a single file line, being counted and starting on our trip downstairs. Every inmate now downstairs and lined up again, all began to sing. I have no idea what is being said but I noticed anytime we lined up to be counted prior to eating, we always sang.

"You don't eat breakfast today", one of the inmates wearing an orange vest said as he approached me. "You have to go to the doctor". I have a doctor's appointment so while everyone else is eating I'm sitting, taking in my surroundings and waiting for my so-called doctor visit. This is my first morning at the new facility and when everyone is finally done eating, the inmates go out to start their daily routines. Those who clean start while others begin marching. Again, I am told to just stand and after an hour or so, myself and 7 others who need to see the doctor are told to line up to walk to the medical facility. Escorted by one officer and three inmates who wore orange vests, we started off to the medical facility. It was a short walk, only about five buildings away and once we entered the building, everyone had to walk through metal detectors. Once successfully on the other side of the medical detectors, I see many police officers. Some are inside a room with cameras while others walk around the building. I also saw many others wearing the same orange vest as those who walked the group over to this building. Every inmate outside those in the orange vest is given orange shirts to put over our prison uniforms, then we are put into a waiting room.

Though there were many officers present, I noticed that all the inmates were the people working. Inmates were on computers, standing guard, directing traffic within the

building, drawing blood, swabbing mouths, giving CT scans, and everything else. This was extremely surprising. The officers trusted the inmates to completely run the entire facility's operation. What was even more surprising is that the officers present did nothing but watch monitors and talk. I had noticed yesterday that the police really didn't do much but I had no idea the prisoners ran the buildings. I thought I was going to a medical facility to see a doctor, but I knew without a doubt that the entire prison and campus was indeed run by the inmates when I saw how the medical facility was run. I now knew I would have a spoon soon, because it was the prisoners who scheduled, controlled and had access to everything within the prison. This not only baffled me but it also made me grow even more concerned about my safety in Chinese prison.

I go from room to room getting height, weight, blood drawn and body scans. Everything was conducted by different inmates wearing a white lab coat with an inmate uniform under. Once I get everything done, I'm taken to a waiting room full of inmates. Everyone is sitting fully unhandcuffed, speaking amongst themselves, and staring at me. Some have never seen a black person before and a Chinese inmate comes to sit next to me wanting to engage in conversation. After asking my name and what I'm in prison for, the inmate leaves to tell others what he just found out. Once everyone knew I could speak Chinese, many other inmates began to come over wanting to talk to me but I quickly told them all I didn't want to converse. Inmates were being called out of the waiting room to be seen by the doctor or dentist. Since there are inmates from other buildings waiting to see the doctor, I sit until everyone that walked over with me has been seen for whatever ailment they had.

As my group walked back to our building, one inmate informed me that we were passing where our food was prepared daily. While we walked and passed another building, I heard music being played. I wanted to know what was going on inside that particular building and how I could get inside to play the drums or guitar. There were signs and advertisements about the prison everywhere as if the government were trying to convince people to come put handcuffs on because they would enjoy their time in prison. When we arrive back at our building, it's almost lunchtime but people are still marching and as I go back to standing in the same spot, I'm given a sheet of paper which has the rules in English. I was given the same sheet of paper yesterday but the rules were written in Chinese so after having someone translate them, I was given the list and told I would be standing everyday all day until I memorized every rule. The list of Chinese rules had over 100 rules on it but the English translation I received had only 15 and as I stood alone looking over them while others marched back and forth, I was approached by one of the inmates wearing an orange vest.

"You have three days, or you will be punished," the Chinese inmate said.

I was starting to see and understand the role in which the inmates who wore the orange crossing guard vest played at the prison. These inmates were in charge of the daily operations of each building, and they were also in charge of and over all the other inmates. They served as correctional officers within the facility and possessed nearly the same amount of power as the officers who were employed by the Chinese Government. There

were even inmates who had more power than some officers. The power to do any and everything they wanted while being a prisoner. And this, in most cases came with the extreme abuse of their power. On one instance, while standing reading my English translation of the rules, one of the officers accompanied by an inmate officer, approached the group of those who were marching. The officer barked out commands that made the entire group stand at attention. The officer begins to call inmates to him one by one, asking each a series of questions. When the third man who is called forth by the policeman begins to speak, the inmate officer starts to yell in his face. Though I don't know what all is being said, I assumed this particular man was getting the answers to everything wrong. Things got worse when the inmate wearing the orange vest who accompanied the officer began to slap the other inmate in his head and face multiple times, all while yelling at him. The officer then instructs the other inmates to continue their marching, while he watches this inmate physically and verbally abuse another. That's when I realized, THIS was a part of the norm in Chinese prison and I said to myself, "Ain't nobody about to walk around here smacking me up like that."

After two days, I had memorized the few rules I had been given but before I no longer had to stand at attention for the entire day, I had to recite them for one of the inmates who wore an orange. Since the inmate couldn't speak English I had to do my best to explain the rules in Chinese. I was now marching with the rest of the inmates and it didn't take long for me to have a problem as only an hour into marching I began to feel sharp pains on the bottom of my feet. This was because I was the only person in the entire prison without a pair of sneakers. In the jail everyone was only allowed to wear flip flops or house shoes and I had to special order mine because there were none within the facility I could fit. I had a feeling I would have to go through the same process because I was now marching every day in slippers with the sole nearly gone. The bottom of my feet, toes, ankles, and achilles were in excruciating pain. It was an extremely difficult time because not only did my feet feel as if they were bleeding the entire time I stood, marched, and ran but I did not know the language well enough to understand the commands when they were said. I learned the few new words that were used which allowed me to easily catch on with the marching. Some of the words I knew already but I didn't understand when they were spoken fast and sometimes the tone of voice used threw me off. About face, left turn, right turn, march, and many other commands were said and if I failed to get them correct then I would be yelled at and berated by both the inmate officers and the prison officials.

The real police officers did nothing during their work hours and each day I saw how the inmates actually did run the entire prison. Every inmate who didn't wear an orange vest was forced to obey the orders of those inmates who did. I had to ask inmates for permission to go to the restroom, to speak to an officer, to scratch my head, anything, and though they wore the same uniform as I, they had much authority over everything that happened to me and everyone else. These people did indeed run the facility and in reality, they did possess all the authority. There was no getting around it. Though we marched all day, there were some days where we were forced to stand at attention the entire time between meals. No dancing, no marching, no talking, nothing, until the inmate officers felt like telling us to begin our march. If one had gotten bad news, or didn't feel good about

something on a certain day, they had the power to go about the day how they wanted and treat other inmates any way they wanted. Days of just standing at attention and inmates getting physically abused were things that occurred often.

On one occasion I had to use the restroom but no inmate who didn't wear an orange vest was allowed to move about alone unless he had great relationships within the prison. The rule was three people were to go together. One person could be a suicide risk. Two people could be a fight and murder risk, but three people could get there and back safely. When it came to our group of inmates who were still in what they called prison training, they had us take breaks to use the restroom as a group. We usually did so by groups of ten at a time and everyone just went during a certain time whether you had to use the restroom or not. On the day I had to use the restroom and after asking multiple times and holding it for a while I asked when is the time everyone would be allowed to take a restroom break because I can no longer stand and hold my bladder. The inmate officers over the group that day gestured for me to wait longer. After calling out to him again, I was being ignored. Next, I began to walk off to go to the restroom. I hear yelling, swearing, and racist remarks being said in Chinese. I turn around to see the inmate police walking fast towards me. I suddenly stop and tell him I have to use the restroom and I couldn't wait any longer. He grabbed me by the collar of my shirt and tried to pull me back in the direction we had just come from. This was the same inmate who accompanied the officer as he asked questions and began to slap the inmate who got the answers wrong. I knew he had become accustomed to physically assaulting other inmates but he was about to find out what he did to other inmates, he could not and would not do to me. I slapped his hand down and away from the collar of my shirt, then I grabbed him by his shirt collar before pushing him away. I next raised my hands with my fist balled, prepared to make an example of him.

Many of the other inmates wearing orange vests ran towards us screaming, getting in between us, then I'm told to come by a different inmate wearing an orange vest and escorted to the restroom. The police officers were not present nor told about the situation but the inmate who took me to the restroom area just asked me not to disrespect the guys who were working. That would make everyone else feel it's ok to do the same. "Now he has no face", the inmate officer said to me. I understood what he was saying, they all wanted to show they were the authority figures and they needed to save face by avoiding humiliation, but I reacted that way for the same reason. No one would ever feel they could just touch, yell, or do anything to me without it being a problem and I didn't care who they were. I didn't like it because in my eyes we were all the same. We were all convicted criminals and all wearing the same prison issued uniforms. Wearing an orange vest on top made him no different than me. After I came back from the restroom, I fell back in line to march and that is what I did for the rest of the day. From the moment we finished eating breakfast until lunch, and then after lunch to dinner, we marched as if we were preparing for battle.

Later in the evening, immediately after dinner I noticed there were two phones and people in line to use them. The foreigners were getting a chance to make phone calls and I asked an officer if I would be able to use the phone also. I remembered being told by the judges after my verdict that I would be able to use the phone immediately and call out as often as I wanted after I got transferred. I expressed this to the officer as well and I hadn't

asked about a call until I saw the other foreigners on the phone, though every day I saw inmates lined up to make calls. An English-speaking officer was standing nearby, monitoring the phone calls, so I asked him about my phone call. I had been waiting and I'm told ok, he would ensure I would receive one, but it wouldn't happen that day. Days had gone by and I still had yet to receive a phone call so I asked again. I told the English speaking officer that I had not spoken to my family in years and I had been promised access to communicate with them upon my arrival. This time I'm told according to the prison rules I have to wait and it would be three months until I warranted a phone call. It wouldn't be until after I learned all the rules, did the daily marching, and completed the basic training only then would I be allowed to use the phone. Trying not to get upset, I responded by informing him what I was told by the judges and how I should be able to contact my family but the officer simply said "each prison has different rules and judges don't dictate what happens inside them. You will have to wait three months until you finish training".

After a few days the English-speaking officer approached me and asked if I had been having problems within my cell. I responded by telling him no, but I knew someone complained about the pushups and sit-ups I had been doing every night for 30 minutes before bed. The officer then tells me that I'm not allowed to do any physical activity inside the cell. "I have to do some type of workout, if I don't, I will get sick." I informed him that my whole life I've done some type of exercises daily and I need to continue to do so for health concerns. I didn't feel marching and standing at attention was enough physical activity. I was then told that it would be fine for me to do so but I can't allow others to see me working out because they aren't allowed to within the cell. I told the officer that I would get up early each morning before anyone else was awake and do 500 pushups and 1000 sit-ups. He said that would be fine but again said it was important that no one else saw me and I couldn't be loud and wake others before the sound of the national anthem.

"Your family really cares about you", the officer says right before he tells me that I will be allowed to make a phone call because my family had been calling the American Embassy who in return kept calling the prison asking about a phone call on a daily basis. I'm excited about this because not only are we extremely eager to speak to one another but I know they were told the exact same thing I was told. We were all expecting for me to be able to make a call upon my arrival. Days later I ask again about access to the phone but I am told I still must wait three months. I didn't understand how I could be approached and told I would soon get a phone call, then days later be told I have to wait. I knew these were not rules and regulations that had to be followed but something they were forcing on me. For some reason they didn't want me to speak to my family. I didn't know if the prison was scared of what I would say or if they just wanted my feet and my heart hurting for as long as possible.

The American Embassy would be coming to visit the inmates from America in a few days. There was a middle-aged black man from Louisiana who was serving a life sentence for international drug trafficking, an older Chinese man from Hong Kong who was an American citizen according to his passport serving 10 years for tax evasion of his international business, and myself, wrongfully imprisoned. While we waited for water or to

eat I was able to speak with the other foreigners as they passed because they had been told not to talk to me. I'd always heard that people in prison never felt they were guilty but this was truly the case with not only the other two Americans but every other foreigner as well. It was hard to completely dismiss the fact that these men could truly be innocent, especially since I was in the midst of such terrible injustice. Maybe we all were really innocent.

I had already prepared letters and art for my family and friends to receive. I was excited to give them to the embassy because both my mother's and my son's birthdays were approaching. I wanted them to receive something from me and for them to know I was thinking of them. As an expression of my love, I decided to make them both birthday cards and I knew they would love them. I was even more excited about the fact that we were only a few months away from being reunited and I was honestly still hoping to see them sooner. I still had every intention of appealing the guilty verdict I received for a second time.

On the day that the embassy arrived, I was called from my cell and walked downstairs where the two other Americans were already standing. With my letters and pictures in hand, I stood there engaging in the first open conversation I was allowed to have with other foreigners. The officer in charge of our building begins to speak to me and the American from Hong Kong says the officer is telling me to give him my letters and pictures. The officer demanded that I give them my letters but I don't understand why. After refusing to relinquish the things I prepared for my family, I was still unsure of the situation as the officer yelled and demanded I hand them over to him. With a 4 officer escort, myself and the 2 other Americans walked to another building which I'd never seen on the campus. This building was strictly for inmate visitation and as we entered, I was surprised to see the building so full of both inmates and civilians having conversations. This was the first time I'd seen the two classes of people interacting with one another. Some of the conversations were filled with laughter and others with tears. After observing the room, I instantly wanted to receive a visit from my family also. I remembered being told by the judges that my family and friends would finally be able to come see me once I was transferred to this new facility. I had many questions to ask concerning this.

For more than two years I had become accustomed to giving my letters to the officers in front of the American Embassy representatives so they would know exactly how many they should receive, the letters were translated right there in front of me the same day, and I would watch my government reps receive the letters. The prison officers told me they had to translate the letters prior to the Embassy's arrival and it took days for this process to be complete but I refused to accept that answer. Each American was given a 10-minute visit simultaneously one after another to speak with our government officials and I was the last one to speak with the embassy. The moment I sat in front of the bulletproof glass, I told the embassy I had the things I prepared for my family whenever they were ready to take them, but I wasn't allowed to pass the letters through. A short conversation between the policemen and the embassy representatives ensued and I was told by the embassy that the letter and translation process differed a bit from the last facility I had been held in and the officers had to have the letters in their possession first. I was also told that their process will take a few days, in order for them to thoroughly read

through the letters to ensure I wasn't saying anything I wasn't allowed to say. Only after this process was successfully completed would my letters be sent through the mail to the consulate general.

I was extremely nervous about this new process, not because I was saying things that were forbidden, but because I didn't trust those who worked within the facility due to my previous experience and these were the most important set of letters I had written to date. This was my family's and I first bit of communication since I received my appeal verdict and had been transferred, so they needed to know I was doing ok. I also had to make sure my son got his birthday card. It was his last birthday before he became a teenager and I wanted Wendell Jr to receive something from me so he knew there wasn't a passing day that I didn't think of him. I prayed the Chinese prison officials would send my letters in the mail as soon as possible because I wanted my mother and son to receive their cards before their birthday and I wanted everyone else to receive their letters also. The embassy stressed the importance of receiving the letters in a timely manner and the prison officials ensured they understood these letters were the only means of communication my family and I had. When I tried to hand them to the officers I was told to wait until we got back to the building. I didn't understand why I was waiting for the embassy to leave before giving these letters to the Chinese prison officials. I hoped they didn't plan to not send them off and act as if they never received them from me. I didn't have to stress the importance of these letters to the American embassy because through years of interaction they knew. Calls to the prison continued as everyone waited for my phone call and when I asked the embassy about receiving visits, I was told they had to get more information about friends visiting because they didn't think I could receive visits from anyone except family.

The American Embassy representative informed me that my lawyer TianShi had been to the facility multiple times to visit but had been denied access each time. I had no idea she had attempted to visit me and I wanted to know why I wasn't made aware and more importantly, why she wasn't allowed to see me. She was my lawyer and since visits from counsel was a right, she should have been allowed access. When I asked why she was not allowed to come see me, my government had absolutely no idea why. I felt like this was the perfect time to tell the American Embassy that for more than 12 hours a day, I was on my feet standing and marching with no shoes. I informed the embassy about the agonizing pain my feet felt all day from standing at attention and marching, and in order to alleviate some of the pain I was feeling, I asked the prison officials if I could buy some shoes but was told no. I needed some shoes urgently and I begged the embassy to bring me some or inform my family and lawyer of the pain my feet felt daily. Sneakers of any kind would be sufficient and I suggested that even if my lawyer wasn't allowed to visit, if she could drop off a pair of shoes to the prison I would greatly appreciate her. Whatever or however things worked, I just asked for them to help me because I was in dire need of shoes more than anything because if I stood and marched in slippers any longer, I would need new feet.

I wanted to check to make sure my family members were doing well and I also wanted to make sure each second I spent with the embassy was used correctly. I tried to let my government officials know as much as I possibly could about what was going on inside the prison without getting myself in any trouble and when I started to tell the embassy I

had not been able to speak to anyone except the inmates who served as correctional officers, my meeting was then cut short.

On the walk from the consulate visit I took advantage of the opportunity to engage in conversation with others who spoke English and I had so many questions. The first was “Why do we sing before every meal?” While laughing, one of the other Americans says, “that’s how they brainwash the inmates. Making everyone sing the same lyrics 3 times a day. The song is about how great communism is and how great the country is and that it still takes care of them even though they’re prisoners.” I was also told by the second of the two Americans to give my letters and pictures to the prison officials at least 2 weeks before the embassy came to visit us. This was the only way my family would receive them and this meant I had to write everything extremely early but it would allow the translators time to read and completely dissect my letters before they were passed on. I was also told I wouldn’t see the embassy as often as before because they only visited every three months. This upset me because I had been seeing them and receiving letters from family monthly. Because I would no longer be visited each month, my access to and communication with the outside world would be slowed down tremendously.

Once back at the building, I remembered how long the translation process took in the jail and I didn’t know if I or my family would even receive the letters at all. I asked why we were visited only every three months and the other inmate from America said “you’ve already been convicted and are in prison, what more can they do for you”. This was true, I had been convicted and I was indeed in prison, but there was still a lot the embassy could do for me. I still wanted to see them at least once a month. After hearing I wouldn’t see the embassy for another three months, I asked the officer about my phone call situation and why I was told I would receive a phone call as soon as I arrived. It was a complete lie. It went from I would be able to talk and receive visits to I won’t be able to talk until 3 to 4 months, and no visits at all. I had yet to see or speak with anyone and it was extremely heartbreaking. I thought about how the Chinese government and prison system continued to disappoint me by not upholding law and truth or standing on the things they said.

I started to ask about TianShi coming to visit on numerous occasions and her not being able to see me. I asked why I didn’t know she had come. Why was she denied access to see me? The officer told me he didn’t know and had not been made aware of that situation. Both my government representatives and the Chinese government said that she should have no problems physically seeing me because she is my lawyer.

As I sat thinking about my first embassy visit within the new facility, everything I heard, said, and didn’t say, I wished I could have said more. I wanted to tell my government how the officers did absolutely nothing. I would often see officers sleeping around a building full of criminals, even with their hats completely covering their face or just drinking tea, smoking cigarettes. All they did was talk and laugh with other officers and inmates. I couldn’t believe these men did absolutely nothing every day and the more time I spent there, the more I was convinced the officers were not in charge of the building but the prisoners were. The officers were there just for show and because they had to be, but everything from the paperwork to prescribing and passing out medication, to daily

operations of the prison was done by inmates. The officers simply showed up and got a check.

The foreigners were all within the same building as I and we were very few in number. As I was there a bit longer, the stops to converse with me happened a bit more frequently. There were two inmates from Columbia, one from Pakistan, one from Thailand, and six from various African countries. I didn't understand why speaking to every person who spoke Chinese was ok but speaking to the few people who spoke English was forbidden. This baffled me and though I wanted to I didn't feel like I was in the position to question why, who I was allowed to converse with was unacceptable. While the Chinese inmates could speak to each other and speak to us foreigners, the foreigners could not speak to each other. I soon found out that wasn't fully the case. It was just myself who couldn't speak to them and the foreigners actually shared a prison cell. Finally, I found out exactly why I couldn't speak to the only English-speaking people in the prison. I was told it was the same reason I can't get a phone call, I had to complete boot camp then I'll be able to speak to the other foreigners as freely as I spoke to everyone else.

I continued my early morning workouts before everyone would wake up and it seemed as if my body's natural alarm clock woke me around 5:30 each morning. No one saw me working out due to the entire floor being asleep so I abided by the rules of the officers by not encouraging others to also workout. The great thing about working out in the morning is that I got a full hour to do pushups and sit-ups as opposed to the previous 30 minutes before the Chinese national anthem sounded and we were all to get up at 6:30. As long as I didn't wake anybody up, I was fine to get as many pushups and sit-ups in as possible.

Every inmate that came through the prison was asked by other inmates, what they were there for, and how long their sentence was. Though I always heard you were never supposed to ask those questions, after being asked many times, I began to ask the Chinese inmates, what landed them in prison as well and how long would they be there. In the Chinese language many words sound the same when pronounced and the only thing that makes the words different is the tone used when the word is said. When I asked a few of the Chinese inmates how long they would be incarcerated, I heard the words woo and chee. In Chinese the word woo is 5 and the word chee is 7 so I was thinking five to seven years is not bad. Most of these guys would be home soon. It wasn't until I spoke to a Chinese inmate who had already been in prison 5 years for murder with a woo chee sentence did I have a conversation with one of the foreigners about the judges and their sentencing techniques. "Everybody got 5-7 years in this prison, even a guy who killed someone", I stated and the foreigner from Columbia just laughed. "Why do you say that? " he asked. "Because everyone keeps saying woo chee, woo chee, woo chee" I added, and this made the man I was speaking with laugh even harder, "those guys who told you that, they're never going home. Woo chee is not 5-7 but LIFE in prison. That's what I have too." As he stood there smiling in conversation, I couldn't force myself to smile. I couldn't make sense of how he could smile knowing he's serving a life sentence and would never see his family, friends, or be outside of prison walls again. He proceeded to tell me his first sentence was the death penalty but after 2 years was able to have his sentence reduced to Life in prison. "I was

terrified when I was told I had just been given the death penalty. In China, they put a bag over your head, stand you over an open grave then blow your brains out. After your body falls into the grave, they just cover you up with dirt and drive away.”

I was speaking to inmates that were in prison for everything under the sun, from selling drugs, to prostitution, to dismembering the body of their parents, literally everything. I had never been in such close contact with people who had done so many terrible things and though I knew where I was, I began to understand fully where I was and who I was now surrounded by. I was now rubbing elbows with hardened and career criminals, repeat and lifetime offenders. I began to wonder, how did I get in the same building as all the people who got Life sentences? They had already forced me into prison and I shouldn't be here, now they were going to try to keep me forever. I wish I had been made aware of this when the embassy came to visit because I would have definitely informed them of all the buildings on the campus, I was in the Life Sentence building. Knowing which building I had been placed in made me want to appeal the verdict even more. I wanted nothing more than to get out of prison. A phone call was needed urgently because I had to speak to someone about what I had just found out. “They're trying to keep me here for LIFE!”

After dinner inmates were showering, walking the hall, talking, and watching TV as they did every evening. Because I was unable to do any of these things, I was in my cell reading, writing, and listening to all of the commotion going on outside, until I hear yelling and see people running down the hall. When I get up to see what the noise is about, I notice a fight has broken out in the hall just to the right of my cell. It's four of the inmates who wear orange vests beating one man. They punch and kick him until he is laying in a pool of his own blood. There is so much blood on the ground so I begin to look in their hands for a weapon. One of the men who is standing over the bloody inmate does have something in his hand but I can't make out what it is. As the man's lifeless body laid on the floor, the prison appointed correctional officers all began to spit and urinate on him. I can't believe what I'm watching take place with no officers around to stop what's happening. The man was brutally attacked for what seemed like 30 minutes and that's when I heard sirens and whistles. Everyone scatters and is told by the group of officers who are approaching to go into their cells. The bars begin to close, and those who are left in the hallway after the cells were locked got on their knees, with their fingers locked behind their heads, and placed their foreheads on the wall. Inside my cell everyone is seated talking about what happened and only one person is standing looking through the bars at what's going on outside the cell. As the police stood over the dead inmate's body the inmate who wore an orange vest within my cell began to tell everyone to be silent. Though he was not a part of the physical assault he stood there and did nothing as a correctional officer while the man was beaten to death. I sat on my small bucket inside the cell and I could see the inmate's arm sprawled out as his body laid there and blood continued to run.

The Inmates who served as the paramedics and doctors for our building put the lifeless body on a stretcher and transported it away. Officers are walking past yelling into each cell and after a few minutes, two officers are dragging one of the inmates who's responsible for a fatal assault down the hall. While he is in handcuffs another inmate is

mopping the blood off the floor. The inmate in charge of our cell begins to speak. "Shut up" he yells, commanding the full attention of everyone in the cell. He begins speaking so fast I can't comprehend much of what he is saying. As he spoke, he was looking around the cell but I feel he is looking at me more than others. The foreign inmate from Thailand was in my cell and he spoke English, so I asked him to translate what was being said for me.

"That can happen to anybody in here, so none of you should think you're special", is what was said and as I looked around the cell into the eyes of the other inmates, they all looked terrified but none more than the eighty-two-year-old man who had received a life sentence for murder. He didn't have many days of life left and he had been in the cell crying many nights in disbelief that he had smothered his wife of sixty years while in bed. Now he no longer shared a room with his wife but a cell with other convicted criminals. I had already felt like my life was in danger because of where I was and who I was around but seeing a man beat to death by inmates who have been put in control of the daily operations of the facility with no one to care was scary. No one cared what happened, not even the police. They would not come to your aid if you were being beaten to death, but would only arrive after you lay lifeless on the prison floor.

All inmates were forced to have some sort of job while in prison. After each meal there were inmates, whose job was to clean the tables, sweep and mop the floor of where we ate daily. As inmates sat around talking, the other African American inmate was doing his job cleaning off tables. While doing so his body suddenly hit the ground. He is having a seizure and body begins convulsing, while foaming at the mouth, but nobody is doing anything about it. The Chinese inmates were pointing and laughing at the man and that wasn't surprising. What I was surprised about was seeing the police laughing at him and when one officer walks towards him, instead of aiding the man, he steps over him and continues walking as the inmate is shaking and banging his head on the concrete floor. No one seemed to care until one foreigner went over to grab his head in order to stop it from hitting the ground and others rushed over to pick him up and place him on the same table he had just cleaned. I didn't know what to do as this was my first time ever witnessing someone having a seizure in my presence. It seemed as if every day I saw something new that confirmed the thoughts I had about none of our lives being of any value or importance in Chinese prison. I knew that at any moment I could be killed, and even those with ailments and sickness were just a number who could die at any moment.

I'm outside walking and the sun is high and shining bright. I notice as I walk on ice but not slipping, the sun is shining directly on the ice. It starts sparkling and it's one of the most beautiful sites I've ever seen. I walk further until I approach a golden gate that is extremely high. When it is opened, I'm escorted through. That's when I hear singing and my heart is filled with great joy. It's the best feeling I've ever felt in my life. I awake and I'm still in prison but I know that dream was a beautiful sign. It gave me a great feeling as I started my morning workout because I truly felt happy in the dream. I felt free. The joy I felt in the dream realm carried over to the physical realm and I was super excited about the day. I knew I was truly closer than ever before to receiving freedom. My lawyer had come to see me this same day and for the first time I was allowed the visitor. I asked her if they

gave her any reasons as to why we couldn't see each other prior to this day? She said they simply told her I couldn't have visits but gave no reason why.

I'd waited to see TianShi again, and we spoke about appealing the guilty verdict for a second time but she didn't feel like that would be a good idea for two reasons. The first reason she gave was that the government would drag out the case, making me wait and I wouldn't see a judge or have a court date until I had only days left on my sentence. The other reason was the one she was most concerned about. My lawyer TianShi felt the Chinese Government would feel disrespected about me appealing a second time, and instead of sending me home they would give me more years in prison. This was not an unfamiliar outcome and though I felt the judges got it wrong and I should not be in prison, I listened closely to what my lawyer was saying. My desire to leave prison at that very second had me ready to appeal once more and I wanted to be told I was innocent but I trusted her wholeheartedly and valued everything she said. TianShi had yet to lie to me and never gave me advice that made me feel uneasy. I was still going to stand firm in my innocence yet I would not worry about appealing the verdict.

"Stay positive and stay strong", She said. "You are so close, don't worry, you will be out soon. The hardest part is over. You're almost Free" Hearing her words encouraged me and made me think of the dream I woke up to just hours earlier. We were so close to rejoicing, and I praised God. Mentally I prepared my mind to finish out the remaining time of my sentence. My lawyer also told me she got me a pair of shoes. I was thrilled to hear this news and was hoping she passed them directly to me so I could wear them. I had been waiting for a pair of shoes for so long, and when she told me she got me some Nike basketball shoes, I got even more excited to put those comfortable insoles on my feet. I couldn't wait to have some shoes that I could fit, that felt comfortable, and that were actually nice. My feet would be thankful. She asked if the bulletproof glass had the sliding option in order to hand them to me as I sat there in front of her but the officers said anything from the outside needed to be inspected first and afterwards I would receive them. Before our meeting ended, TianShi passed my new shoes to the officer who escorted her to the meeting area. "I'll be back to visit you soon. Your family said they love you and see you soon." my lawyer stated. "I love all yall too and I can't wait"

When I got back to the prison yard, I told the officers I finally had shoes to march in and that my lawyer just dropped them off to me. I wanted to get them as soon as possible and as I waited for hours, I began to ask the officers why I hadn't received my shoes yet. I watched my lawyer put the shoe box in the hands of an officer but for some reason they hadn't arrived. I had no idea why but knowing the discomfort my feet felt was close to ending but still hurt at the moment was frustrating. I finally have something that will make military training bearable and my heart felt good as I waited knowing soon I would have some new Nikes on my feet soon only to be told they didn't have them. The officer who TianShi gave them to simply kept the shoes, never giving them to me nor returning them to my lawyer.

Every inmate in the prison had LeBron's, Jordan's shoes, and many other signature shoes, so the thought of me also having some excited me but I was still the only prisoner

without footwear outside of slippers. I am in prison not allowed to wear any of my clothing, or talk to family so I feel well, or even have comfortable footwear. The treatment I received was completely unfair and the Chinese prison officials tried everything to break me and my support system. A few days later I was approached by an officer who handed me a box and said it was from my lawyer. I was so excited, I knew there were shoes in the box but I wanted to see what kind of shoes I had just been given because the box differed from the one my lawyer tried to give me days ago. Up to this point I had still been marching in slippers every day and to finally get some shoes was an amazing feeling. To know someone cared enough about me to send me shoes or anything else when I needed it made me feel loved. There were many people around when the officer gave me the box and I didn't want to open it in front of everybody but it seemed like they all wanted to see what I had received more than I did. When I opened up the box every inmate around got excited and spoke about how I had just received a great pair of shoes.

I burst into uncontrollable laughter as I opened the box stuffed with two pairs of shoes. I had just received my first pair of karate slippers. It's like God always knew what I needed to keep my spirits up because I thought of Martin's character Dragon Fly Jones, and said "Silenceeeee", and began to laugh harder. I had been laughing and talking about people wearing their karate slippers from the moment I arrived in the country and now I had a pair of my own. The inside of the karate slippers had some sort of fur that was so soft and the base was sturdy. They were the most comfortable pair of shoes I'd had in years, but what I appreciated most is that my lawyer thought about the pain my feet had been feeling and also sent me 3 pairs of insoles. My feet would definitely have a bit of comfort while I was in training. I couldn't wait to write home to my family and let them know I was now a karate master and I felt every time I put my karate slippers on, I had the power to kick through a brick wall.

Each building on the prison's campus were very close together and from the windows and yard of each building we were able to see what was taking place in the neighboring building. Daily we were able to see the other inmates marching, playing basketball, or watch them on their commute through campus for work. Though it was forbidden, inmates in different buildings engaged in conversations with one another. Yelling from the windows or even approaching the gates happened often with only 50 feet of space separating each gated building. Since I was in a building where the majority of the inmates had life sentences, I assumed each building was similar, for different offenses and length of sentence. Every day I watched inmates from nearby buildings go to and from their jobs. Some inmates worked in the kitchen where all the food for the prison was cooked, some worked in the doctor's office conducting all physicals and inmates screening both dead and alive. Others simply stayed at their building and worked there, but the majority of the inmates imprisoned worked in the factory. A combination of three buildings where all four floors in each were filled with machinery and inmates working. The factories produced everything the inmates wore from underwear, uniforms, to shoes, but also clothing, footwear, toys, boxes, computers, household appliances, couches, and everything else thought of for use in the outside world was also manufactured there. The inmates worked more than 12 hours a day, 7 days a week and received phone call time as

their compensation. Seeing inmates wake up extremely early, eat breakfast as I was doing my morning workout, travel to the factory and work all day every day was depressing for me to see. Though at the time I too was ready to work all day just for a phone call back home to my family, but I knew after a week or so of labor I would have tried everything to quit. Unfortunately, inmates didn't have the option to quit, they were slaves.

Early one morning as I'm outside marching, I notice there are construction workers in one of the buildings next to mine. I began to wonder what they were working on and why the prison had workers come on campus to do work on just one of the buildings. Higher gates and more barbed wires had been added all over. New steel doors and bars to all the windows had also been installed. I didn't understand why all this was being done, especially since I'd never seen anybody at or outside the building in which they worked. A few days later instead of basic training, every inmate in my building had to move bricks and boulders from the building next to us. This process took six full days as there were no wheel barrels or any other tools for us to use. We transported rocks from the size of a baseball to the size of car tires by hand to a dumpster that was moved to the front of the building.

The neighboring building was nearly complete and I assumed the prison was preparing to house more inmates within it. I was happy that I no longer had to spend the whole day moving bricks because I now had cuts on my arms and my karate slippers were now dirty. One day in the middle of the night my sleep was disturbed by what sounded like a party. I looked out the window for the people who were making all the noise but saw no one. The more I listened, the more it sounded as if a multitude of people were chanting. I fell back asleep but the yelling continued for hours. The next day nearly every inmate was speaking about the loud noise through the night. I was surprised to find out the yelling was coming from the building that all the construction had been done on because I was unaware that any inmates resided in this particular building. I asked what was going on inside that building and a Chinese inmate responded with one simple word, "Muslims."

It was the month of Ramadan and the building with extra reinforcement next to mine was full of Chinese Muslims from XinJiang province and beyond. All Muslims within China were considered to be terrorist and are discriminated against due to their religious beliefs. The majority of Chinese muslims in order to avoid, moved into their own communities. They are treated as foreigners and strangers in their own country and for decades Chinese authorities have raided these communities and detained Chinese Muslims for long periods of time without cause or conviction. All Muslims who were incarcerated for any offense within or near the province were taken to the facility I was in. Every police officer and inmate I came in contact with when I asked about the Muslims within China, not those who were currently in prison but Muslims in general, they would say they were bad people. One inmate said all they did were make bombs and blow things up. It was believed that muslims wanted to overthrow the government and take over the entire country of China. It seemed as if these were the thoughts of every Chinese person that wasn't of Islamic religion.

The police officers and everyone else felt Chinese muslims were the most dangerous people on the planet so the muslim inmates were treated as hostile and the most dangerous threats to society. While other inmates were allowed to leave their cells, go outside to inhale fresh air, talk amongst other inmates, the muslim inmates were on a 24-hour lockdown and not allowed to leave their cells. They could do nothing, they couldn't go anywhere and each inmate was housed in small solitary confinement cells, 24 hours a day. They could not converse with one another because it was thought they were always conspiring on how to overthrow the prison and government. I knew the Muslim inmates were treated worse than other inmates in the prison just from how they police and other inmates spoke about them. From the terrible things said about them you could hear how fearful people were and how threatened they felt by this one group of people. "Those motherfuckers are terrorist" is what was consistently repeated. The American from Philly that I shared an apartment with while free was also a follower of Islam, so I had met a few Chinese Muslims and their families. One family owned a restaurant that we often frequented and they were extremely nice and respectful people. After hearing how the rest of the country felt about them, I could only imagine the discrimination and hatred they faced daily. I didn't know if this was due to the belief in God or the mass majority's disbelief.

Sometime later all the foreigners were transferred to what was called the "foreigner's building", yet I was left behind. I didn't understand how there could be a building designated for those who were not Chinese yet leave me inside a building where I would be the only person who wasn't Chinese. I asked the officers, "why are all the other foreigners moving but I am staying here". I was told because I had yet to complete my three-month basic training, I was unallowed to move to the foreigner's building. I still found it weird that everyone else would be leaving but I would be the lone foreigner and as everyone was packing their things to move, one of the foreigners pulled me aside and told me to be careful because now that I was alone both the inmates and police would now try to gang up on me. Did they have something planned to get back at me after my incident with the guard? Was I next to be beaten to death by a group of them? I was also told to stay clear of the officers because if one disliked you, they would send inmates over to assault or even worse, kill you.

All the foreigners were now gone and I'm the only one left in the entire building who isn't Chinese. This wasn't an unfamiliar environment for me but unlike the first place where I was the only foreigner, there were only thirty people I had contact with daily, now I was one person surrounded by nearly five hundred Chinese inmates. Five hundred people, most of which did not like black people.

The days seemed longer now and though I could not stop and have full conversations with the other foreigners, we always kept an eye out for one another. I thought of the things said to me by a few of them before they were moved. To stay away from trouble, and to stay alert because many inmates may want to try and harm me now that I am alone. I'd already had these things in mind but even if I was alone, I wasn't going to allow anyone to treat me less than the man I was. Days later two inmates that serve as guards came inside my cell, looking, walking, and at times just standing around. Though they tried to converse with some of the other inmates inside this was extremely suspicious

because they'd never done this before. I knew to be on high alert and my head had always been on a swivel to ensure I was not caught off guard. After staring them down and watching them move about my cell for a long time, they wanted to engage in conversation with me before leaving. Once the 2 orange vested inmates left one Chinese guy looked at me and said, "you're very smart", to which I replied, "you understand?"

My daily schedule consisted of the same things. Workout, clean, march, and eat. I was to march, staying in sync with the other inmates for hours on in with few breaks in between. Every day at 3pm the marching stopped for 10 minutes. Each inmate had to go to the facial recognition scanners to count and account for every inmate in the building. This was also done in the evening after dinner. My face could not be recognized by the machine so when the time came I just stood at attention. At this same time, a song was played over the prison yard speaker system. It was the only English song I'd heard the entire time I was imprisoned and though it was good to hear English words, it was listening to the words of the song that caused me to really think. It made me think about where I was, where I had been, and where I was going. That song made me dig deeper and go even further inside myself than I had ever gone to ensure I wouldn't be taken under by negativity whether it be thoughts, people, or circumstances.

I heard Hotel California by The Eagles every day and I was determined to not go crazy but be filled with the strength to persevere. As I listened to the lyrics, I felt I was alone on a dark highway, but I intended to only see the shimmering bright light ahead. I decided, this would be heaven. I heard the song everyday for months until I nearly memorized its lyrics and each time the song began to play, I thanked God because I knew I was walking through hell yet approaching heaven's gates.

As everyone slept one night, I awoke to the sounds of screaming and yelling. I initially thought it was coming from the next building but the sounds were too close. The noise was not only coming from inside my building but it was even on the same floor as I was. I didn't know what was going on because it was taking place inside another cell, but I did know something serious was happening. Officers and inmate paramedics rush past my cell and I see one inmate being carried on a stretcher covered in blood. The next morning when everyone exits their cells, it seems as if every inmate is trying to inquire information about the screams that disturbed everyone's sleep. Inmates in cell 409 had woken up to a Chinese prisoner trying to kill himself. Early in the day he was smashing his own head on the wall of his cell until two of his cellmates stopped him. In the middle of the night, he tied his bed sheet to the side of his top bunk and attempted to hang himself and the constant movement of his body woke his cellmates, where they could save his life. Prior to this he attempted suicide by diving head first off the top bunk but after this failed he then tried to hang himself. The screaming had come from his cellmates, the police officers who were watching the video cameras, and those sent to save him and rush the inmate over to the hospital. He had been trying to kill himself all that day and had it not been for others within his cell, he would have succeeded.

Though it was madness all around me and I still felt I shouldn't be in prison, I had so much to be grateful for. I was months away from seeing my family and there were many

inmates who would never leave the prison yard. There were people in the world who would switch places with me in a second both in prison and outside of it. I knew I would be free and my dreams were confirming it. I kept seeing myself outside prison walls and partying with family and friends. I was often traveling the world with my wife and children. I was even out in space near the stars and looking at planet earth. To see these things felt so good and I wanted to keep that feeling. More importantly I needed to keep it. I needed to stay elevated above anything trying to shake me or make me think negatively. I literally dreamt of freedom almost daily.

A group of five men stood naked in the yard with their clothing next to them on the ground. They are new arrivals to the prison and four of them were foreigners. All from Africa and all of them spoke English except one. Though they were new inmates just as I was, and we were all now doing the same basic training, we were told that we couldn't converse with one another. We should have been able to speak to each other and when I asked one of the officers, "why I was not allowed to speak to the other foreigners who were the only people who spoke English?" After being told I couldn't because of training, I was finally told the truth. "We don't want you all to come together." Disgusted, I replied, "But you all are together and you outnumber us 100 to 1. Why can you all come together but we can't?" All the Chinese people around were threatened by the foreigners and I didn't understand how we could possibly be a threat to them being so few in number.

I walk through a building until I am standing at a podium among many of my family members. As I am speaking to them, they are crying so I come from behind the podium and begin to comfort them. "Everything is ok, everything is going to be alright", I say. A tall, bald, dark-skinned man approaches me, and hands me a set of keys and a ring. When I look at this man, I think of how much he resembles my uncle, and after I receive the keys and ring, the man turns around and begins to walk towards a nearby door which is open. The lights in the room on the other side of the door are extremely bright and I can see the light shining in the room I am standing in. As he exits through, an older woman follows close behind him. I hug and console my family members, and as I am doing so, I too start to cry. When I awake, I'm still crying just as I was in the dream. "Why am I crying?" I didn't know why exactly but the pain my heart felt while I was sleeping felt so real.

The next day an officer comes to me saying he has some bad news to tell me. I thought of all the terrible things he was about to tell me, most was about my case and staying in prison longer. What I didn't expect was him to utter the words "Your Grandfather has died." My heart dropped as I instantly thought of the dream I had the night before and the pain that pierced my heart that morning came back even sharper. I sat and thought about those words all that morning but hours later the same officer approached me and said my grandfather wasn't dead but he was sick and at any second could go home to be with God. As my grandfather laid in the hospital, knowing his time was drawing nearer, he requested to see and speak to all of his children and grandchildren. I thought about where my grandfather was, the physical condition he was in, and how far away I was from him. I thought about his children who admired him fully now standing at his bedside in tears. Reality setting in that he would soon no longer be there to lead them. I thought about his best friend and wife of nearly 60 years, heartbroken as she watched the love of her life fade

away in front of her. Yet I smiled as I thought of all the conversations we had, and everything he had taught me. Then the sharp pain in my chest came back as I thought about never experiencing those things again. He was the head of our family and where we all started. I thought of all the knowledge he instilled in me over the years, all of which resonated more as I grew into manhood and continued to grow. I ultimately reflected on how blessed I was to have been able to spend that time with him. I thanked God.

My family had been calling the American Embassy who in return had been calling the prison nonstop in an attempt to get my first phone call since my arrival. Tired and cold on a rainy day, I was removed from training by an officer. “Do you have money?” he asked. I did have money but what the officer said I would need it for had my heart beating through my chest. “You’re going to call your grandfather.” I couldn’t slow my mind down as all I could think of was what I would say to my grandfather. I’ve always seen him standing upright, strong, wise, and full of love, light, and life but all I could picture in my mind’s eye was him lying in a hospital bed, brittle.

I was escorted away from the building by an officer and 2 orange vested guards. I was being led to one of the buildings on the other side of campus. Once the gates of the building were opened, I walked to the entrance of the building and was instructed to sit in a chair that was near a desk with. While I waited, the telephone was brought out by an inmate in what looked like a tool box and was connected to plugs in the wall. I’m then shown a list of three numbers and told they had been programmed into the phone for me. I can only recognize one which was my mother’s cell phone number. Then I was told the other one was my grandmother’s number and the third number was my grandfather’s hospital room number. All I had to do was press the pound key followed by either 1, 2, or 3. Whichever of the three contacts I wanted to call, followed by the pound key a second time. Though I did want to speak to my mother, I needed to hear my grandfather’s voice and he needed to hear mine. When I heard the dial tone, I pressed the pound key, then the number 3, and the pound key. It rang for nearly a minute before I asked if hanging up would cost me my phone call. I’m told I can call until someone answers so I hang up and call the hospital room again. The phone goes unanswered once more, so I decide to call my mother, but she too isn’t answering the phone. I begin to think, what could everyone be doing? I’m finally allowed to call home but no one wants to answer their phones. I then thought about the time difference between China and America. It was nearly noon where I was, so it was nearly midnight in Detroit. Discouraged, “Maybe everyone is sleeping”? but knowing I still had one more number to try. I decided to dial the second number on the list, which was my grandmother’s cell phone number. I hoped she would still be awake as the phone rang and I waited in suspense. There was no answer but I was extremely anxious so I called again because I wanted to speak to someone and I didn’t know if I wouldn’t be allowed a call ever again. I was hoping I wouldn’t run out of attempts. A soft voice in almost a whisper answers, “hello”,

“Wassup baby, how are you doing?”

the soft voice hardened, “Who the fuck is this”

“Oh, so now you don’t know your own son’s voice”, I replied.

When she heard this my grandmother then lit up with an indescribable excitement, “I’m so happy I answered the phone because when I saw the call was from a number with about 20 digits, I wasn’t going to!”

“I know and I was just going to keep calling,” I said while laughing.

My grandmother then told me that her husband was strong enough to speak but not loudly, so she put me on speaker. I could barely hear what my grandfather was saying but I did hear him breathing and trying to speak to me. I was happy we did get to speak with one another but still trying to wrap my mind around the reason for the call was difficult. My grandmother did let me know everything he was saying. My grandfather said he was proud of me and loved me and I said the same to him. I thanked him for everything he had done for both myself and our family and I told him how fortunate we all were to have him. I also told him that I would be home soon and I couldn’t wait to see him, hug him, and talk to him. I asked him to wait for me to get home because I would be there soon and he said he would, and couldn’t wait for me to kiss him on the top of his head. It was good to hear from my grandparents but unfortunately, I didn’t get to use all 10 of my minutes. As I was getting information about granddad and the rest of the family, the doctor came into the room for my grandfather and my grandmother had to be attentive. Before my grandma ended the call she said,

“Stay strong and please stay out of trouble. Don’t let anyone cause you to do anything that would force you to stay longer than you are set to.”

“I won’t grandma, I promise”, I replied.

“I love you son. We love you. I will see you soon.” And the call ended.

Chapter Nineteen

CAGED FREEDOM

The caged bird sings with a fearful trill, of things unknown, but longed for still, and his tune is heard on the distant hill, for the caged bird sings of freedom.

-Maya Angelou

Chinese New Year is the biggest holiday in China and the entire country shuts down as its citizens get a minimum of two full weeks off work. All the inmates were excited about the holiday as the prison routine also changed a bit. For a full week there is no basic training, the snacks we were allowed to purchase were special holiday editions, and the food would be served for breakfast, lunch, and dinner would be of better quality and taste. The Chinese New Year holiday was THEE Holiday.

I planned to buy some snacks to celebrate the week but when I saw how much money I had left, I had questions. "Why did I have a 100 RMB charge on my account?" I approached the officer who spoke English to try to dispute the charge.

"Your grandmother is funny", the officer said.

"What? What do you mean?" I responded.

"She was saying lots of curse words when you talked to her."

The police heard every second of my call while I spoke to my grandparents and the 100 RMB that had been taken from my account was the charge for the phone call. I didn't bother to ask any questions from that point because I had already figured out everything I needed to know. Phone calls were extremely expensive and the police were listening to every word. No wonder the inmates worked so hard.

Though they were working, it was still vacation time for the officers who were on duty. More of doing nothing than ever before. The TVs were turned immediately after breakfast, a projector screen was set up to one end of the cafeteria that played movies all day, and I saw a basketball for the first time since being put in handcuffs. There would also be an inmate talent show during the week but the inmates within the prison weren't the only people who would perform. A concert would be held where outsiders would come to the prison and perform. This excited all the inmates who had experienced Chinese New Year in prison. Though I didn't know how safe it would be, many inmates within my building assembled the stage that would be used for the performances. The excitement of other inmates who had already been incarcerated for years and had experienced this time of the year before made me excited. I didn't know what to expect but I knew the week

would differ from what I had been experiencing. Many family members of inmates were coming to visit those incarcerated around this time as it was indeed a festive time of the year. I had never seen so much joy or heard so much laughter from the prisoners. It was as if I was staying in a totally different place.

There were many arguments and fights that had taken place during the week due to our temporary moments of freedom. Some consisted of inmates who had somehow consumed alcohol or drugs but each time, the entire group would be punished. The officers would resume basic training but when this occurred, it only resulted in more arguing and fighting. A fight occurred that involved one of the inmates from Africa who had been hit by a Chinese inmate while we all were marching. The Chinese inmate got upset because the African inmate was not in sync with the rest of the group which caused the entire group to get yelled at by both the orange vested inmates and the officers. The African inmate defended himself from the Chinese inmate who had attacked him in front of the entire yard. Defending himself caused him to be taken into isolation inside the Muslim inmate building for three months, but the Chinese inmate received no punishment at all. That same day another fight broke out between two Chinese inmates while we all ate lunch. The result of this fight was fatal as one man was stabbed to death with a pair of chopsticks. I don't know if the chopsticks had been sharpened but I knew a man was killed with them. I honestly thought a chopstick stabbing would have occurred much quicker, and a lot more frequently. Nothing would make me believe that this was the first time an incident like that had occurred, because they were indeed weapons. The next day, everyone's chopsticks had been taken and each inmate had been given a spoon to eat with.

My lawyer sent me some gifts for Chinese New Year and I was so thankful for what I had been given. I had been sent some snacks, money, and a pair of sneakers. The sneakers had been made in prison at the factory and given to me by an officer who worked in my building. Karate slippers are nice but I was excited to finally change shoes from time to time. When I received my new shoes, they didn't have any laces in them. Instead, I was given 14, 2-inch rubber ties that resembled small zip ties to secure the sneakers on my feet. Shoe laces were considered a hazard in prison because inmates could use them to harm oneself or others. The few inmates who did have laces in their shoes had them cut extremely short but they also were guards or friends of guards. There was a full basketball court in the yard of each building and there was only basic training that was conducted on and around the court and rims prior to the New Year. During the week of the Chinese New Year celebration, basketball, soccer and badminton were played. Inmates were able to engage in sporting activities. The inmates played a basketball game against a team of guards who also had 2 officers play. The small chairs were brought outside and all the inmates who didn't play had courtside seats, ate snacks and watched the game. It was funny to see the officers playing, and one of them was actually pretty good. There was a badminton and ping pong tournament where the winner received a prize. Ping pong was the activity that caused the most arguments.

I was super excited to play basketball because I played and coached often while being free in China, but it had been years since I felt real Spaulding Leather on my hands. The Chinese inmates were happy about it as well. The trash talk started early as all the best

players in the building wanted to challenge the black american to a game of basketball. Everything I saw in the movies about prison basketball was completely true. It was bully ball, no fouls were called and no fouls were given. The fouling never ceased to end and at times the physicality within the game got dangerous and led to many injuries and many fights. There were plenty of good players in the prison. Many could shoot well, some guys were fast, and there were some inmates who were not only big but also athletic. Just as I had noticed outside prison, the game of basketball was 1000 times better than football in China. I showed everyone on the yard that I was the superior athlete there, running faster, jumping higher, and simply playing better than anyone else. I even showcased my athletic ability by playing soccer for the first time in my life. I initially wasn't going to play but both the African and Chinese inmates persuaded me to. Though I didn't have a good handle on the ball, I found out that most of the time, the game of soccer is similar to a fast break on the basketball court. A lot of running the lane and touch and go passing. It was easier than I thought. I quickly saw why all the inmates were excited about the New Year Celebration week, because for the first time since the morning before my arrest, I was having a bit of fun.

There was much truth to the rumor that the inmates put on a concert. It was the day before the big performance from civilians who would be brought into the prison to entertain us. I was asked to be a part of the inmates' concert after I heard one of my favorite songs randomly playing. Many inmates were inside watching tv, playing Chinese chess and other games but I sat outside in the sun watching people play basketball and badminton. I hear a familiar beat and the words "I'm wayyyyy up, I feel blessed", I get super excited and rush into the area where the televisions were only to see my city's Detroit Big Sean, Toronto's Drake, and Chicago's Kanye on the projector. I begin to bob my head, and rock back and forth while singing every word to the song. With all eyes on me I was now giving a concert. I was immersed in the beat, the lyrics, the artist, the entire song. I felt like it was a sign from God. To go from hearing only one English song in years to now listening to one of my favorite songs of all time, I knew it was a reminder that I was indeed blessed despite where I was and that everything would be ok. Later that day, I was asked if I wanted to be a part of the concert and I said "only if they are doing it with me", pointing to the remaining foreigners. Two days later in the afternoon after watching inmates sing, play instruments, and tell jokes, we were on stage. I laughed the entire time I was on stage due to watching the other foreigners lip sing and dance to Rick Ross. The Chinese inmates and officers were amazed and consumed in the performance, and afterwards many said they enjoyed it. There were only 350-400 inmates from different buildings there but I was thinking more about the real concert the next day.

After lunch every inmate in the prison was being escorted to the area on campus where the stage had been put together. I had never seen so many armed guards, police officers, and police dogs in my life. I understood why it was necessary to have so many officers as there were over 10,000 inmates sitting on small chairs brought out from their cells. These performances were 1000 times better than the ones the day before. Many talented men and women had come to the prison to sing, dance, tell jokes, play instruments, and even do magic tricks. The most exciting part for me was seeing people

who didn't wear uniforms which I had been seeing every day. It was almost as if I was free, until the yelling started back as inmates were migrating back to their buildings and I had to help break the stage down.

Soon after, I was transferred to the building with the rest of the foreigners. The foreigners building as it was called was actually the building that consisted of inmates who were old, sick, or mentally challenged. The orange vested inmates in the building were young and active, but I wasn't sure if they too had some type of disability whether it be mental or physical. The rules were the same, they still had all authority in the building and over the rest of the inmates. When I arrived I was moved into one of the cells on the top floor where the rest of the foreigners were. The foreigners' building was really the foreigners' cell and since I was the last one to get there, I didn't have a choice of which bunk I would sleep in. I was to sleep on the top bunk closest to the cell entrance, which wasn't ideal because climbing up and down the metal rods to get to the top killed the bottom of my feet. This caused me to wrap a towel around the two rods I used to climb up, but was told by an officer I couldn't leave the towels there.

I was around people who weren't Chinese for the first time in years and it was good to be around people I could converse with. Some of the foreign inmates could speak both English and Chinese fluently. I was glad there was always a translator around for me, but I soon noticed that the relationship between some of the foreign inmates in the cell wasn't good at all. A Nigerian inmate who was about 6'5, 280 pounds serving a life term for international drug trafficking and distribution, was the one who had problems with many of the foreign inmates. I often heard him make rude and reckless comments to some of the other foreigners in the cell and soon I began to see him shoving, slapping, and bullying them. He never treated any of the Chinese inmates this way but he had much favor among them. Though I saw this daily, I never got involved in their affairs as we were all grown men, but I knew if he ever tried me like he did those other guys, he would have the worst day of his life. Because personalities clashed daily within the cell, it didn't take long before all foreigners would be split up.

My daily schedule changed a bit now that I was in another building and it no longer consisted of basic training and marching every day. Each inmate still did the daily room cleaning every morning before breakfast, but I now had a job as did all the foreigners in the building. Some inmates served food, swept, mopped, cleaned the tables, trimmed the hedges outside and whatever else the police assigned. My job was cleaning outside around the yard and I had to do this almost daily. This could be equipment, trash, grass, rocks, or anything else. Many inmates complained about their job but since I only had a few months left of imprisonment, I wasn't going to complain at all. I told the officers whatever they wanted me to do, I would indeed do it. I think my good faith and desire to avoid any trouble or having any negativity being associated with my name helped with how the police viewed me, and they didn't call me to work as often as others. Since I didn't have to train any longer nor work often, that time had been allotted to God. I was able to get deeper into prayer and meditation. I also had time to create a vision board. I had been thinking of making a vision board even prior to my incarnation but never took the time to make one. While inside I took things out of all the magazines I received while in the first

facility. I included everything from beautiful sites to beautiful people, and all the things I had envisioned for my future. It was the vision I saw.

I was asked by an officer if I wanted the job of assisting one of the foreigners who had epilepsy and a few other ailments. This was the only other African American inmate and whom had been stepped over by officers as his head banged on the floor while having a seizure. I said yes with no problem and he would finally have someone to help him who cared if he lived or died. I had to make sure he took his medicine twice a day and stay close to him in case something happened where he required aid. Some days he wasn't feeling well, so we both would stay in our cell when everyone else had to go downstairs for prison meetings. Most of those meetings lasted only an hour then everyone would be forced to watch prison rules off the projector. Some days inmates would be allowed to sit down to write, draw, or read but there was absolutely no talking, and if there was talking, laughing, or noise at all those inmates would be punished.

Representatives from the American Consulate General continued to visit the American inmates, but it was now bi-monthly compared to every three months. Each inmate's conversation with the American government differed because each of our concerns were different but they informed us of all matters with our families and they also wanted to make sure we were all doing well inside the prison. Though I was preparing to leave in a few months, I still wrote letters for my family to read. I was also able to send the vision board I created home to my family. I was ready to leave prison and I only had less than six months remaining before my dream came true and I was extra careful not to do anything that would cause my date of release to change.

We were now able to do physical activity outside once a week. Some weeks if things were going well inside the prison, the officers warranted us two days. Inmates did many different things with the hour of outdoor activities. Some inmates walked or jogged around the yard. Some did push-ups, sit-ups, and filled their buckets with water to curl and squat with. Some did Tai Chi. Some played ping pong and some played basketball. The majority of the people who played basketball were foreigners and the inmate guards. I still did my workouts every morning before every inmate in the building was called to wake up so I used that outdoor time to play basketball.

As I laid on my bunk I heard yelling coming from outside my cell and just as the bars began to open, the yelling could be heard getting louder. Every inmate inside is told to stand outside and are guarded by two officers and four inmate officers. Six officers accompanied by eight orange vested inmates enter the cell and begin to search the entire cell. It's a random contraband search and after about 15 minutes we are allowed to enter our cell again. Everything is a total mess, our sheets were off our beds, snacks, clothing and personal hygiene products were all over the floor. Personal bin had been pulled from under the bunks and every inmate's belongings were now mixed in together. It was complete chaos and every inmate is now sorting through the things on the floor. Arguments and fights start over certain items being missing.

There wasn't a day that passed where there wasn't some sort of conflict. Though it was filled with old and ill inmates, it seemed like more fighting occurred in this new building than the one that had all the life sentence criminals inside it. The foreigners were treated extremely badly by both the orange vest inmates and the officers. Many days the orange vested inmates would walk past a foreigner and begin to beat on them. One instance I saw an inmate from Columbia randomly smacked in his face and had his head banged on a table multiple times by one of the guards. Not one police officer would stop the abuse the foreigners endured daily. I asked the Columbian why he didn't say anything about what happened to him when his government came to visit and he said some things that I understood completely. "They wouldn't and couldn't help me. I would probably be killed after." I remembered feeling the same way. No one could help him and informing his government would only make matters worse for him. The other foreigners didn't receive visits from their government as often as I did. Even if they could say anything about the mistreatment, I knew they wouldn't because they wanted to be safe while inside. Visits from their country's embassy only happened twice a year, if they were lucky. There were only two or three foreigners that never had to worry about any problems with the Chinese inmates, and for some reason I felt I was one. I didn't run into many more physical altercations after I stopped the guard in his attempt to choke me and besides some sly comments or attempts to start verbal altercations, I really didn't have too much to worry about within the old and sick facility, but if or when I did have worries, I was ready for it.

I'm now able to get the phone call like all the other inmates. Every inmate was to receive one ten minute call each month. Instead of thinking of who I would call, I thought about how I would buy food to eat after my expensive monthly phone call. After everything my family was doing for me and all the money they had already spent to help me, I couldn't ask them for extra money for food. "I have to pick up some work hours", I said to myself. When I asked some of the foreigners why the price of calls were so high, I was told the monthly calls cost a lot less than what I had paid for my first call to my grandfather. That was great to hear because I didn't want to ask for a factory job. I was no longer worried if I could afford to use the phone and I was finally able to call my mother. Both of us had been waiting to hear each other's voice and since she missed my first call I was happy she finally answered the phone. My grandmother told her we spoke and I was able to ask about the family and how everyone was doing. I wanted to know everything that was going on at home but she was more worried about my well-being and if I was ok. After telling her I was fine, I wanted her to tell everyone I loved and missed them. I wanted her to thank everyone for me and I let her know I was strong enough to endure but I was so ready to be free. She simply replied "I'm ready for you to be free too, son."

I wanted to know how she, my grandmother, and the rest of the family had been doing since my grandfather had passed away. I didn't know how to ask but I was concerned and wanted them all to be well mentally and spiritually. I wanted to know what they were thinking and how they were feeling. I couldn't be there with them physically but I wanted to be so I could care for them all. I could however be with them mentally and spiritually. I told my mother that she had to move grandma in with her so she could take care of her. I couldn't imagine how my grandma's mind would be wondering if she had been in a home

alone. My mother said she was already in the household with her and I was proud because my mother always knows exactly what to do. As I am still speaking, the phone clicks, then hangs up. but I have no idea why. My 10 minutes had ended while I still had so much more to say. "Unbelievable!"

Waiting a full month to contact my family again was difficult. When I couldn't call, my mindset was "I wish I could talk to them", but now I had a call monthly and the anticipation of being called by the officers to use the phone plagued my mind. It was now, "When do I get my call." As I watched others prepare to make their calls, I saw some inmates pull-out small notepads to read from and I thought it was the smartest thing ever. Write down everything I needed to say because those 10 minutes seemed more like 10 seconds. The things of extreme importance would be said first and with whatever time left I could talk about anything else. I noticed the orange vested inmates set the phones up for the inmates. They along with their friends got as many phone calls as they wanted. Every month there was conflict over the phone calls and I felt it was something the officers loved to see. Though every inmate was allotted a call each month, the officers in charge would allow one person at random in each cell to get an extra phone call every month as well. This caused division among the inmates in each cell because every single person wanted the extra call. Some inmates who won used the call, and some sold it to the highest bidder. Many inmates felt this process was unfair by saying the picks weren't random at all but given to the most liked inmate in each cell. Monthly, the lucky draw phone call caused many physical altercations.

Since the American government was the only government to actually come visit their citizens who had become convicted criminals, the only means of communication that other foreigners had were phone calls. On many occasions phone calls weren't being connected. No one knew why the phones failed to work for the foreigners and When asked, what was wrong? and when will it be fixed? The officers could not give a reason as to why it didn't work nor when the phone would be working again. The foreigners were also told if they weren't on the call speaking either English or Chinese, they could not talk on the phone. I began to think this was the reason the phones never seemed to work and this caused a huge fuss between foreign inmates and officers. Most of the inmate's family members resided in places where the majority of the population spoke neither Chinese nor English. This was completely new to me but a constant for those I shared a cell with. It was another way the Chinese officials excluded communication for the foreign inmates to the outside world.

As the Colombian inmates prepared for their visit from their government, I was asked by one of them for help writing a letter in English so he could communicate with his family since he wasn't allowed to call. Though writing a letter in Spanish would do neither him nor his family justice, he simply wanted to correspond with family. I felt his pain deeply and I asked, "How would his family read the letter if it was written in English?" He didn't know nor did he care saying, his family would find someone who could read English. Understanding just how desperately he desired to have some type of access to his parents, wife, and children, I helped write his letter and he gave it to the Chinese prison officials so it could pass the translation process. He would finally be able to communicate with his

family until he was allowed access to the telephone. I also recommended he inform his government officials that he hasn't been in contact with his family and to explain exactly why with the hopes that they would aid him and help the issue be resolved.

Whenever TianShi came to visit me, it was always a blessing. I always waited anxiously to see and speak with her. She brought more sneakers for me because the first pair had been worn down tremendously. She knew I would need more so she brought three more pairs of shoes. Two of them were prison made shoes but the third pair were black Nike Air Max from my sister. I was super excited to have real shoes, but I wouldn't put my new Nikes on until it was time for me to walk out those prison gates. The prison shoes had a thick rubber sole that looked up to par but the quality was so bad that after a few wears I would bust through them as I ran. I believe she knew about the quality of the shoes and for that reason, she sent multiple pairs.

There was one huge difference about the visits I previously had with anyone who came to see me and the last one with my lawyer. The police told my lawyer if she wanted to visit me, we would not be allowed to speak English, with the hope that she would just give up on trying to see me. She responded by saying "no problem" as the officers didn't feel I spoke Chinese. When I begin to talk, I heard the officer who transported me to the meeting say that I wasn't allowed to speak English and TianShi translated what he said to me. I couldn't believe this was allowed but I had witnessed it happen to other foreigners every day. We were forced to conduct a full conversation in Chinese which we'd never done and it should never have needed to be done. What were we to do? My lawyer and I couldn't dispute it because it would only end in us not seeing or speaking to one another at all. This was the prison officials' way of attempting to cut off my visits and communication. They had done it to all the other foreigners by trying to forbid us from speaking our language. My lawyer and I spoke, and since I learned a bit of Chinese I was able to hold a conversation. I didn't speak the language fluently but it was a lot better than both my lawyer and the officers assumed. We kept the conversation simple as she asked how I was doing inside to which I responded by telling her what I did daily. I also told her that I can now use the phone every month, play basketball every week, and how much better the food was in prison than jail. I was saying every word I knew how to say to keep the conversation going. I asked her how both our families were doing, to which she responded "Everyone is doing well and still thinking of me every day."

Not only did I understand what she was saying but she also understood me and our conversation was full of laughs and smiles. She was extremely impressed at my ability to hold a conversation in her native language. She told me she didn't know if we would be able to speak and was prepared to just look at me to make sure I was ok, but I surprised her. She knew the prison officials tried to make it so that we could not converse, after denying access to see me many times previously so their thoughts were, he can't speak Chinese and if we forbade her from speaking English, there would be no way they can communicate. We proved them wrong and took delight in doing so. The officer who was responsible for escorting me back to my building was trying to talk to me after witnessing me engage in a full conversation in his language. He asked questions, and I responded in Chinese, "I don't understand what you're saying."

While in a deep sleep on my top bunk one evening, I feel someone shaking the bunk. I open my eyes to see who is the reason I am now awake but everyone in the cell is sitting up on their bunks looking at one another. No one is moving but the bunkbeds are shaking uncontrollably and cups, toothbrushes, and other personal hygiene products are hitting the floor. It's a massive earthquake and the inmates are panicking as the ground won't stop shaking. "If this building starts to collapse the police would not open the cell for us! They will let us die here," one of the inmates from Africa exclaimed. I know he wasn't the only one thinking this because I too was thinking it. I also wondered "what if God was shaking the prison just to open the cell and free me like he freed the apostle, Paul." The next morning everyone was speaking about the prison shaking. It was my first time experiencing and surviving an earthquake but while imprisoned it wouldn't be my last.

Inmates were allowed to wear clothes that were not prison uniforms only to exercise and sleep. Each article of clothing had to have the word prisoner or the name of the prison painted on them. The items of mine that had been taken away from me on my first day had been put in storage. I was given access to them so I could have something to wear while engaging in physical activity. I saw one of the foreign inmates had a few yellow tank tops and I wanted one. I asked if he was interested in parting ways with one of his tanks and he said I could buy one. His asking price for one tank was two packs of noodles, two bottles of Coca-Cola, and two Chinese rice crispy treats. Though it was the most expensive shirt I'd ever purchased, I had big plans for it. Once I got the shirt, I asked one of the inmate officers for a black marker because I was about to make the jersey of the greatest basketball player on the planet. The Los Angeles Lakers had just signed LeBron James months earlier and I was about to be the only person in the whole prison with his jersey. When I finally finished the jersey, every inmate said how cool it looked and they knew any time I put it on I was recording a triple double. There were days the inmates were able to watch NBA Basketball and even the FIFA World Cup. I only heard about FIFA soccer until I saw they had it for basketball as well.

There were every kind of bug and animals within the prison and they were always roaming around freely and were excessively large. Dogs, cats, pigs, chickens, and everything else was inside the prison walls but they were able to move about more freely than I. At one point for a span of months there was a bird's nest in the light fixture of my cell. Some didn't like them flying in and out of the cell nor to hear them chirping early in the morning and all through the day but I loved it! It made me feel like I was sharing my cell with good spirits regardless of the body they possessed. One night, I got up in the middle of the night to urinate and I saw something out of the corner of my eye. I don't know what it is but it's on the wall and it seems to be moving fast so I turn my head only to see a spider as big as a youth football crawling on the wall. I couldn't believe what I was seeing. I had only seen spiders this big on TV and my initial thought was to leave it alone and go back to sleep. Before I could walk toward the bunk, a terrible sight flashed my eyes. I didn't want to wake up completely webbed and stuck to the wall like in horror movies so I went into action. I grabbed the broom and tried to hit and smash the spider but it jumped from one side to the other. Now I'm nervous because this spider jumped higher than some NBA players. I knocked it off the wall to the ground and tried to hit it more but It's moving so fast and now

moving towards me. I'm stunned at this point because I can't believe this spider isn't scared. Instead of running away it's actually coming at me. After hitting the spider many times, it balls itself up but I don't think it's dead. I wanted to step on it but at the same time I didn't. I was wearing flip flops and the spider was wider than the width of them. I didn't want to get bitten or get its guts on my feet so I swept it into the hole in the ground that was used as the toilet and flushed it or what was called flushing, by throwing water down the hole. I turned around and not one single inmate had woken up and I then began to wonder if the police who were watching the monitor just witnessed me fighting this human size spider. I figured they saw the sole person on every monitor, up with a broom in hand swinging at the air. They probably laughed, though it wasn't at all funny to me. The next day I didn't want to use the toilet I flushed the spider down for the fear of it coming back up and biting me in the ass.

The next visit from the American Embassy consisted of discussions about release and flight times. I was super excited because now I could truly see the light at the end of the tunnel. I was to be deported immediately upon my release and I was told because I was being deported, I could have no layover in China. I had to fly straight from Chongqing to America. I didn't understand what the point was of telling me this because that's what I wanted most, to get straight out of there. I wanted to leave prison for the airport first thing in the morning, at 6am, but the later my flight time, the later my release from the facility would be, and flights straight to America from ChongQing airport were the last flights of the day. The Chinese government usually purchased flights for foreigners who were to be deported back to their country but they didn't purchase them for the day of their release. Instead of sending the newly freed people home, they were sent to another facility where they were still held captive until the Chinese government wanted to send them home, being held anywhere from another two weeks to two years' more. When my family heard about this, they purchased my ticket that same day to ensure I would return home safely and on the same date I was set to be released. My flight was set to leave in the evening so waking 6am and instantly taking my handcuffs off just wasn't going to happen. The representatives from the American Embassy's worry was the same as my family and before departing told me it was almost over so don't do anything that would make me stay longer. I promised I wouldn't.

The bully in the cell from Nigeria who was serving a life sentence had forced a few people out of the cell and other relationships between foreigners weren't solid in the cell. Now only 6 foreigners were in our cell and three Chinese inmates were added. I was told most inmates weren't happy when they had to watch people leave prison, knowing they had to stay. Out of jealousy and envy of my release date fast approaching the Nigerian wanted to spark a quarrel saying, "watch your mouth when you talk to me." I'm not going to say I was waiting on him to get out of line and I really didn't want to do anything to alter the date I had waited so many years to see, but I knew what I had to do.

"You a bitch and I will say whatever the fuck I want! Now stop me from saying what I want to you!", I said as I stood in front of him looking directly into his eyes until he dropped his head while I called him many other unpleasant words. I had seen his kind before. He thought he put fear in my heart as he did the others he encountered but when he saw not

only was I not scared, but that he was about to lose that tough guy status he had within the prison.

“Now watch what you say to me, because next time I’m beating you the fuck up!”, I exclaimed. If he didn’t know before, he knew now I wasn’t like the others who had been allowing him to say and do whatever he pleased. The big bully was really a scared little boy and his fear made him call the police. I couldn’t believe after everything he had done to others, that he would be the type of man to run and tell the police on me. Unless his goal really was to cause trouble for me that would keep me locked away as he was. He was forced to rethink his approach and I was forced to rethink mine.

Chapter Twenty

OVER THE GREAT WALL

If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer.

-Matthew 21:22

I continued to read my Bible and meditate daily. Since most of the foreigners were also believers of God, on Sundays those of us who wished to do so, came together to fellowship. Whoever desired to give the sermon could do so. We had open discussions about the verses read and what message we all received from the spirit of God from each of our understanding of scripture. After the learning and discussion about the scriptures we would pray and break bread by eating snacks together. It had been years since I had the opportunity to fellowship with anyone outside of The Most High and it was a blessing to share in the greatness of God with others. This helped keep our spirits up despite the hard time we were all facing. Our Sunday Sermon would last only a few weeks because a few Chinese inmates started to come take part in the word and spirit of God with us. This upset the Chinese authorities who didn't want the belief of God spread throughout the prison. We were told we can no longer read together only separately. This frustrated some of the foreign inmates but I reminded them that we don't have to wait until Sunday to remind one another of how good God is to us. We could exchange verses daily, send one another notes, and talk about the word and spirit of God everyday in passing. We wanted to allow his light to fill us especially while we were all surrounded by darkness.

I was days away from being free and I could literally smell fresh air and taste the food I would soon eat. I could see the end zone! All those days of using football analogies to get me through. "One more stop" "let's make a play" and now I was literally "on the one-yard line, going in to score". All those nights of worrying if I'll ever be allowed to see my family or if China would hold me captive forever. Finally, I was only a few hours away from freedom. All the tools I acquired through team sports helped me become tougher mentally and it greatly aided and allowed me to endure. I had the next play or the next day mentality. Everything had been taken care of and the American Embassy made sure the prison sent them a headshot photo just weeks before so I could receive a new passport and successfully board my flight.

At this point, the days were extremely long and at night I couldn't sleep. No matter how hard I tried to sleep, it would only result in me laying on the bed staring at the ceiling. I just laid there anxious and overly excited to finally walk outside those walls of restriction. During the day every single inmate would remind me that my release date was fast approaching. It seemed like many people were excited but none more excited than my family and myself. The day was almost here and everyone knew it. I had been writing for years. Writing my thoughts, my prayers, my dreams, my plans for the future, and so much

more. I had been writing about these days that I was now living. My release. I started to prepare by packing the things of importance. The prison officials had to check through everything I planned to leave the prison with, and the things I wanted most were taken from me. The things I spent years putting on paper were taken and I couldn't believe that things so precious to me were confiscated and there was nothing I could do about it. I was able to keep the photos my family had sent to me but everything else was taken even though I was told I could keep them initially. These were the only things that I had to get me through to take my thoughts and feelings away from the pain I had to endure. It was journaling, my artwork and my letters that I sent out and received. I kept a daily scribe of my entire three years. Instead of getting upset about being lied to again, I thought about where I was and everything I had been told prior to this. I knew I shouldn't have expected anything different.

I continuously thought about how close I was to victory. I had no idea what the police would do with my belongings, if they would burn them or keep them to read through everything. One thing I did know is what they were about to do to me. Free me. Still all the plans I wrote down to achieve when I got out, being taken away hurt. I had everything all mapped out, from how I would achieve these things to who I would achieve them with. Also all my dreams I'd seen in my sleep were taken away. Anything that I had written was confiscated and I couldn't believe they were no longer mine.

The prison officials set up a class for all the foreigners to learn Chinese from one of the Chinese inmates who spoke English. Everyday the foreigners were to attend the class for three hours. Since I was days away from being released, I wasn't forced to attend the class but was allowed to stay inside my cell to continue preparing to leave China after four years of being in the country. It was amazing, I just relaxed and thought about walking out those gates. On one hand excitement and the other, anxiety which started kicking in so heavy now that I could neither sleep nor eat. All my thoughts were on how soon I would be around love. How soon I would be free.

The morning of my departure, I didn't do any working out. I continued to lay on my bunk as everyone moved about with their morning routines. I knew I wouldn't be leaving right away and I had no idea as to when I would be escorted outside those prison gates. I just had to wait until my time arrived. Unable to eat breakfast, and unable to eat lunch, I waited for officers to tell me to grab my belongings and kick me out of prison. I had already given away clothes, shoes, extra blankets, books, and the rest of my snacks to other inmates who would be staying in prison. I packed light, only bringing the letters and pictures my family the officers allowed me to keep outside those walls of injustice.

As I laid on my bunk waiting, around 2:00 PM the bars on my cell opened and my name was yelled by someone in the hall. I already knew what the call was about and I jumped down as quickly as a lion pouncing on its prey. The bars at the end of the hall opened so I could leave the floor and I began to take my final walk down those prison stairs. The head officer over the building was sitting in a chair at the front of the building. He handed me a small plastic bag with more of the letters and pictures that they were going to allow me to keep. Still, none of my writings was allowed, nothing handwritten but at this

point nothing mattered. I was just ready to leave. I was told I could now take off the prison uniform so I can walk out wearing a free man's attire. Everything I was to wear was already under my prison uniform. Since I had my pants for my entire prison stay there was no drawstring in them and since I'd lost over 40 pounds during my incarceration, they were now too big for me to fit. The shirt I chose to keep was years old also, with the sleeves and pockets ripped off. These things held much sentimental value to me. Because I kept my shoes in storage they had the laces in them and not the rubber zip ties. Finally, it was time to go and I was escorted to the front of the building.

We stood at the front of the building until the gate opened, then I walked through the campus to the front of the prison. I remembered walking through on my first day not knowing what was ahead but now prison was in my rearview and freedom was in full view in front of me. The police checked my entire body to ensure I wasn't carrying anything unauthorized to have prior to giving me everything I was arrested with. I received a bag with all my personal belongings. My wallet with all its contents, keys, sunglasses, cellphones, and shoes. Everything except the clothing I wore the night I was arrested.

As I stood at the front of the gate waiting to be on the other side, the officers were in conversation and that's when I was told I can't leave yet. We were to wait in the area in front of the huge steel doors until my ride to the airport arrived. Soon after, an unmarked dark blue Chinese made SUV pulled up. Three officers in full uniform exit the vehicle. That's when I knew I would not walk through those prison gates but be driven through. This would be my first ride in a car that didn't have police lights on it in 3 years. I was so happy because I definitely didn't want to ride in a police vehicle as a free man. Though the officers still wore uniforms I wasn't forced to wear handcuffs nor was I muscled into the backseat. I got in the vehicle with the three officers and headed to the airport.

Excitement was flowing through my body while looking at all the beautiful sites from the backseat of the SUV. It was as if I was seeing the world anew and in many ways I was. I thanked God the entire ride as I looked out the windows at the trees, the road, the buildings, the cars, and the sun deep in the sky. I took in every bit of air I could inhale and car fumes never smelled so good. We arrive at the airport, park near a door with nearly no traffic, and sit there. I try to open the door but I'm told not to and that I'm not allowed to leave the car but I'm not told why. I'm ready to get out and just run as a free man, but I'm still restricted. Eager to get out, to see people and to be able to interact with civilians, I sat thinking of excuses to get me out of the car. After 20 minutes of waiting, I asked if I could use the restroom. I said I had been holding it for a while and feeling like my freedom was being restricted I began trying anything to get out. After waiting a bit longer, I was finally allowed to go inside.

I walk through the airport acting as if I'm searching for the restroom but I'm really just looking around and enjoying where I was, or where I wasn't. It felt so good to be free and see life on the outside. I'm escorted to the restroom and totally forgot what it felt like to be in a Chinese airport. There were so many people looking at me in passing but I was unsure if it was because I was black or that I was black with police chaperones. After I leave the rest area I'm taken to the police station, inside the airport and told to just sit there.

Because I'm unable to leave the police station, I still feel like a prisoner. I sat and spoke with the officers for a while, before asking if I could get food. I hadn't eaten the entire day and there was an amazing aroma floating through the air as I walked through the airport. I was beyond ready to get some real food. Still being chaperoned, I walked around to see exactly what I wanted to eat. I walked past clothing stores, jewelry stores, convenient stores, McDonald's, and other restaurants until I saw KFC and stopped.

I ate KFC almost daily when I was free and I thought about how long it had been since I'd eaten a piece of fried chicken. Seeing the lobby area and the menu took me back to a place before turmoil. I knew KFC was what I wanted to eat. I had a few hundred RMB left over from my prison stay which was more than enough to order a 10-piece wing, fries, a sprite and a chocolate sundae. I told the young lady making the sundae that I wanted to eat it before my food came out and I asked her to put chocolate inside the cup first then ice cream with chocolate on top. The taste of hot fudge and soft serve ice cream was unexplainable and had not my chicken been ready before I finished the sundae I would have gotten another. Soon after I was taken back to the police station to eat what may have been the best meal of my life up to that point.

I was able to connect my phone to a charger that belonged to one of the officers within the police station. After spending much time trying to connect to Wi-Fi in order to Facetime my family, I just had to accept the fact that I wasn't meant to speak with them at that time. I still asked the officers if they knew what to do in order to get my phone working. I quickly got tired of being in the back and I wanted to move about freely. I wanted to sit out in a regular seat around people, I didn't want to still be surrounded by police officers in a police station. I asked "Why am I still being guarded and under surveillance?" I asked if I could go to a store to find something to buy and take back to my family as a souvenir and I was told yes, so my chaperone and I began to walk around looking in different stores. I didn't really want to buy anything, I just wanted to get out of the police station and walk around, plus I had enough money to eat only. Walking around the airport to shop was the best decision I could have made because while doing so I saw a friend who had come to see me off. I didn't know he would be there and when we saw one another he told me no one knew if I had arrived at the airport yet. No one had been able to get in touch with the Chinese authorities to discuss what time I would be transported to the airport. My chaperones wouldn't allow me to stop walking in order to engage in conversation nor could I shake my brother's hand but we did speak very swiftly. Once the Chinese police officers saw someone who knew me and had come to see me, they urgently wanted to get me back to the police station and away from everyone. They didn't want me to talk at all and I still didn't understand why.

It was my brother Dee who had come to see me and stood outside the police station now that he knew where I was. I wasn't allowed to stand outside with him but was forced to stay inside, away from where I could be seen by anyone. He was one of the last people I saw before imprisonment and now he was the first I saw as a free man. As he stood there, he got on the phone to call the American Embassy representatives to inform them that I was at the airport and of where I was being held. He also got in contact with my mother and other friends who were also to come to see me off. I was told that many people wanted to come

see me but were not allowed to, stating it would be a protest and riot behind my wrongful imprisonment, so only 10 of my friends were allowed to come to the airport and their names and passport numbers were recorded prior to their arrival to the airport.

Moments later the American Embassy comes to the police station and I'm allowed to go out and speak to them. I'm given one of my bags that I had prior to my arrest which had some of my belongings inside. I was allowed to go through my things and see what exactly I wanted to keep to take back to America. One of the Embassy representatives handed me a phone and I was allowed to talk to my mother and family, at this point many other people began to show up. Many smiling faces, hugs, and pure happiness. It was a celebration that I had finally been freed after three long years of complete torture. There were about eight people whom I met in China that had come to give me their blessings and well wishes. I truly enjoyed them and was grateful to be around love after so many years of being on the opposite side of the spectrum. I spoke to friends, took photos, and enjoyed their presence for as long as I was allowed. With little time to socialize I began making my way to and through the airport transportation security. After taking my shoes off and placing them along with my bag on the conveyor belt to be scanned, they also checked my body very closely. I stood in the full body scan machine first and after a hand wand was also taken over my body. Giving thanks, "Soon, I will be boarding my flight", I thought to myself.

Once on the other side of TSA, I noticed I was still being escorted by police but the American government representatives had to stay behind. When I sat down, three officers sat down with me. I waited quietly to board my flight and after 20 minutes my lawyer TianShi came and sat next to me. I was so happy to see her and I gave her the biggest hug. She told me that she would be flying to America with me because she wanted to ensure my safety, but she didn't tell the Chinese authorities that she would nor did she want the police to know. I was finally able to speak freely to her. I thanked her and I told her how grateful I was for her for the thousandth time. Now I was doing so as a free man instead of one who was in prison speaking through bars. I asked if the police would finally leave and she told me they had to stay until I got on my flight. "When someone is deported out the country, officers escort them onto the plane, and they stay until the flight is in the air." I am stunned that they go to these measures but I also understand. I was also able to use her phone and called family, friends, and everyone else I could think of, now that I had access to a phone and there was no restriction on who I could contact.

A woman's voice is speaking over the speaker and people begin to stand up. It was time to board the plane. My heart begins to beat fast. I didn't expect to be so nervous. All the years of suffering were really over. I didn't believe it until now. I made it over The Great Wall of China and nothing could stop me from leaving now. I'm going home!!

Chapter Twenty-One

HOMECOMING

Are you ready for your blessing? Are you ready for your miracle?

-Chance The Rapper

I'm finally on the plane! The moment I dreamt of so many nights. There were days I honestly thought I would never see this day. Freedom was finally here. As I fastened my seat belt prematurely, letting my seat back, I could say, I was truly "living the dream." I felt like it was graduation day and I didn't have a care in the world. I was soon told to bring my chair back upright because we hadn't yet taken off. It just felt good to be able to lean back and relax, free of worry or being forced to constantly watch what was happening around me or be aware of who was around. TianShi is sitting a few rows in front of me and before we lift off, I ask to make one more quick call to my mother. I'm still excited after I let my mother know I'm in route to see her so I record a message on TianShi's phone to send to the family to let them all know I'm finally on my way home. I'm praising God because the day that we all dreamt of, fought for, waited patiently and faithfully for, we were in the middle of. I couldn't stop smiling because it was finally here. A dream come true. A prayer answered. A miracle.

The flight attendant and pilot began to speak over the speaker. They started speaking Chinese then everything was translated into English. The rules were recited and emergency exits in case of accidents were shown. Before we hit the air, I was already scrolling through all the new movies I'd missed while being in prison for those 3 years. Preparing to watch a movie where the actors spoke English sent chills through my body. It was surreal, where I was, what I was doing. I was still mind blown. I chose to start my trip by watching Black Panther, and I planned to spend the entire flight watching as many movies released from 2016 to 2019 as I could. It wasn't until I heard someone over the loudspeaker say LAX 5:00 o'clock, I knew it was real. With my heart beating fast, reality began to set in. I was *Coming to America* like Prince Hakeem.

After the plane got into the air, food and beverages were distributed. I decided on chicken, veggies and rice, though over the last three years, I'd had enough rice for five lifetimes. While everyone else around me ordered beers or alcoholic beverages, I just wanted ice cold water. Ice water has been my favorite thing to drink all my life and after years of not having any ice and being forced to drink hot water, I couldn't think of a better beverage. I drank the water so fast, and was already chewing on the ice before the flight attendant was able to move beyond my reach. I politely asked for a refill. Nothing had ever been so refreshing. I then reflected on how long it had been since I tasted my beverage of

choice. Again, I thanked God for the small things I had to be grateful for outside of making it to the other side of wrongful imprisonment.

The praise break quickly turned into envisioning the celebration that was to take place in just a few short hours. I could already see my family smiling. I kept thanking God for the victory he had just given us. The thoughts of their smiles and hearing their laughs forced me to smile and I started to sink in my seat. I hadn't felt so relaxed, so safe, and so secure in years. I knew it was a blessing.

I didn't remember falling asleep, but I do remember waking up. I hadn't slept in days so I was extremely tired and I'm sure I was snoring so loud that the other passengers wanted to get me thrown off the plane and out into the sky. I had a few dreams that were so beautiful while I slept. In one, I had huge white wings and I was flying. When I had awakened from the dream, I realized I was still flying, and flying home. A FREE MAN! It was still surreal, waking up and no longer incarcerated after years of mistreatment and injustice. In one of the other dreams I had just woken from, I was crying while I hugged and kissed my family in front of many people. Pictures were being taken of us and I saw people holding video cameras as I spoke to them. I could feel the love and joy of everyone around me. I knew it would be a beautiful ride back home and an even more beautiful welcome. I felt happy and I knew my family and friends felt the same. I was no longer tired and wanted to stay up. I anxiously waited to be back engulfed in the love of my family, so I just finished the movie I had started.

Using a restroom never felt so good. Even though the walls of the airplane restroom were narrow and compact, it was the type of restroom I had grown up using. It had a real toilet. I was also happy to just get up and use the restroom without asking anyone's permission. Since TianShi was a few rows away, we didn't get to converse as much as I would have liked, but she did walk back to speak with me a few times during the flight. It showed just how much she truly cared for me and I was grateful she was there with me. We spoke a bit about flying into LA and a few things that would happen upon my entrance into the United States, with customs and preparing to see my family. "How are you feeling?" TianShi asked, not wanting me to be overwhelmed. She told me that she was happy that my pain was finally over and that I would be able to move forward with my life. I knew we would be friends for the rest of our lives. She was a pivotal piece in my freedom. We shared an experience that not many have. I loved her and appreciated her, she was my sister forever.

When the plane arrived in Los Angeles, there were airline representatives and attendants who greeted me warmly, giving me hugs and congratulations, welcoming me home. I noticed they were wearing football pins and holding small American flags. They waited for me to walk through customs, where I could declare the things I had with me from China. Unfortunately, this is where TianShi and I had to part ways because she was unable to take the same route I was being escorted through. I was being led through areas of Los Angeles airport that only police and airport personnel had access to. Everyone I passed by welcomed me home and when I stopped near customs the officer in charge of collecting my paperwork welcomed me as well by stating he was extremely proud of me

and happy I was home. I exited a door near a huge group of people, it was my family and friends who had come to welcome me home. They were so excited that the roars of cheer caused everyone in the airport, who had no idea who we were, to wonder what was going on. My mother, smiling yet with tears in her eyes, ran over to hug me. It was everything I could imagine as we squeezed one another tightly, not daring to let go. My aunt accompanied my mother to Los Angeles to await my arrival and she hugged me just as tight. They both were extremely happy and kept repeating how joyful they were to finally have me home. They both continued to say how proud they were of my strength to endure such injustice. My mother looks me directly into the eyes, smiles and says “you’re never leaving America again.”

There were so many other people there to celebrate my arrival. My friends, college teammates, other ball state alum, friends of my mother and aunt, and new friends who had been supporting myself and my family for the entire time of my wrongful imprisonment. We had just finished with the toughest fight of our lives and there was so much love waiting for me in LAX. I was extremely blessed to have been experiencing it. People had balloons and took pictures. There were smiles and laughs everywhere. It was a very joyous occasion. To hug my mother for the first time in four years and see her smile for the first time was so special, I went back to give her another hug. We made it back to one another because she refused to let the Chinese Government keep me, no matter how bad they wanted to. It was the best feeling in the world and what we’d all been wanting, for so long. It was the best moment of both our lives. The faith and work of My First Love moved a huge mountain.

I didn't know when this day would finally arrive, but it was here and I couldn't believe so many people had come to LAX just to see me, hug me and to let me know that they had been praying for me. So many people had been doing everything they could in their power to help me. My family got through such a tough time but our pain had just ended. After hugging and taking pictures with old and new friends, my family was told that we had to hurry so we weren't late for our connecting flight. At this time, I was looking for my lawyer because I had hoped she would have come to where we were. I asked my mother to call her but she hadn't answered the phone. I had taken pictures and celebrated with many people in that short period of time, but I wanted to share the experience with the person who had a pivotal part in my presence. The person who spoke for me, the person who believed in my innocence enough to stand apart from her own countryman. Where had my lawyer gone?

My family and I were taken to a private waiting area for premium platinum club members. Inside the first class lounge we were offered a bottle of champagne where we then made a toast to freedom, family, love, and abundant blessings. After a few minutes it was time for us to move towards the gate to board the plane. As we boarded the pilot, co-pilot, and flight attendants all welcomed me on board and back to America. Now I was able to sit and get a chance to speak with my family. It still felt unreal. My mother handed me a plastic bag with all the food she thought I would want to eat. There were burgers and fries, a chicken sandwich, salad, soft baked cookies, she literally knew everything I wanted to eat. My family and I spoke a bit but I was ecstatic to get home. I knew they were ready

for me to get there just as much as I was ready to get to them. I was finally free and able to be with everybody I loved and who loved me.

Before I knew it, it was 5am and I was landing in Detroit Metro Airport. I had even more butterflies than before because after my welcome to America in LA. I knew all of my family members would be waiting to meet me once I stepped off the plane, home in Detroit. Once I finally made it down the escalator to the sliding doors, I heard a great roar of cheers and laughter. Everyone was smiling and clapping, excited to see me as I made it home. My grandparents, uncles, aunts, sister, brother, cousins, nephew, friends and everyone else present approached me. I felt an immeasurable amount of joy fill my body. There were many different news outlets among my family members and as I hugged and kissed them, I was being asked questions by reporters while pictures were being taken. I had just seen this in my dream on the plane from China and I was indeed full of great emotions as I stood there with lights, cameras, and microphones in my face speaking. I was filled with gratitude and love, but I made sure not to allow my emotions to get so high that I cried on live television like in my dream.

My family rented a charter bus so everyone could ride to and from the airport together. It was only 7am but it was a full party on the bus. Everyone started their morning a bit earlier than usual to ride the bus to the airport. They wanted to ensure they could take part in the festivities upon my arrival to Detroit even though the majority of my family still had to go to work that morning. The last time I saw my nephew he was a month old but at the airport when I hugged him, he began to talk to me. That put everything in perspective and let me know just how long I had been away from everyone. I continued to thank everybody for their love and their support and I couldn't stop letting everyone know I was extremely grateful for everything they had done for me. I had the chance to speak with my grandparents, siblings, friends, everyone who was on the bus to share that intimate time with them when I didn't know if and when I would be able to do so. It was the amazing feeling I was experiencing and I was so happy to finally be back. The pain I felt for years was finally over and the bus I was riding was taking me into the next part of my life. The word on my shirt described how I felt perfectly, "Blessed."

Chapter Twenty-Two

HALL OF FAME

We need more light about each other. Light creates understanding, understanding creates love, love creates patience, patience creates unity.

-Malcolm X

My mind is still blown that the airport was so full of family, friends, and news crews upon my arrival. The dream I had on the flight home came true. My heart and spirit knew everyone would be there and that interview would take place, but the interviews for the day were just getting started. It was an instant party at my mother's home, though it was early in the morning. Everyone still had to get to work but took time to congratulate me. A thanksgiving feast had been fully prepared, and after the family gave thanks for the host of blessings we'd received, we began to eat. There were family present from all around America. Friends were stopping by all day long. The entire day was festive. The conversations, laughs, the pure joy and presence of those I cared for dearly was something I was extremely grateful for. I still couldn't believe I was home. I would stop to give praise every few minutes.

My uncle, who's my lifetime barber, made sure he had his clippers ready to give me a haircut. Even though I already got one before I left prison, I was now able to get a lineup. Many news outlets and reporters stopped by my mother's home. All morning I had interviews with Fox 2 Detroit, ESPN and many more outlets about my incarceration and release. It was good to talk briefly about these things because prior to my release, it was forbidden to even mention them. I wasn't allowed to speak about my incarceration verbally with anyone, not even the American Government. Even when I spoke through letters to my family, and when I finally got access to a telephone, still I could say nothing about China nor could they be the topic of discussion, or my forms of communication would be taken away.

After many interviews I got back to my family and friends to continue enjoying their presence and my freedom. The party had never stopped. I couldn't believe I was actually free, finally surrounded by family and friends. It got to be a bit overwhelming. Completely unbelievable. "Wow, I'm really here", and at one point, I felt like everything was closing in around me.

I had an appointment scheduled to see both a doctor and dentist. I needed to get a real physical and from the words of the doctor, I was completely healthy. I had lost a ton of weight. I went to China weighing 240 pounds and I had arrived back on American soil

weighing the same as I did as a 17-year-old senior in high school, 198 pounds. The dentist on the other hand had some work to do. I had a tooth that needed to be removed due to a gaping hole being directly in the center. I also had to go get a new identification card and driver's license. My ID expired years before my arrival. I stayed in Detroit only a few more days before I boarded a flight to be with my son in Florida. I was most anxious to spend time with him because for the first time in both our lives, we had spent a lot of time apart. I didn't know how exactly he had coped with not being able to have contact with his father for so long. He has been in my presence his entire life. I felt guilty leaving him for so long. I hoped he was receiving all the correct information from his mother about my situation and mature enough to understand a bit of what myself and our entire family had just experienced and endured.

I vacationed with my son in Florida for two weeks. We needed to be together so I could get to know him all over again. His likes, dislikes, and who he was as a young man. He had grown so much and though he was the same he was also a completely different kid than I had remembered. I was able to do all the things with him that we had done for years such as taking him to and from school, having fun hanging out afterwards, and just enjoying his presence. It was long overdue because it was unbearable to not be able to see him, hug him, and talk to him. Spending that time together was the number 1 thing I looked forward to upon my arrival to America. We attended a Miami Heat basketball game, traveled to Orlando Disney World, and did many other things in the time together besides enjoying the beautiful Florida beaches and weather.

Upon my arrival back to Michigan from Florida I immediately went back to serving the community. I began doing so in multiple ways. I started volunteering my time and services to many organizations within Detroit. Whether I assisted those who were in need of food, clothing, money, motivation, or resources. I also started to get involved in the things that helped me in my youth. I began to take part in athletic organizations within the states of Michigan and Florida. I began to mentor young people, and coached both youth and high school football. I also helped coach at a High School All American football camp. I finally returned back to the place I had grown into adulthood also. I attended the Ball State University homecoming football game. The night before the game, I was able to meet up with old teammates and also address the football team, to help them prepare for victory. I spoke a bit about mental toughness, overcoming adversity, and the things that will prepare them for victory not just in the game, but in life. I was also invited to go out to midfield for the coin toss with the team captains. It was amazing to be back on the same field I played. It was my first time back to Ball State University in many years and the campus had changed a lot since I had last been there. It was a joyous return and I was able to enjoy the entire stay with my family and friends who had accompanied me on this trip. I was honored to be back and my return to my alma mater was greater than I could have imagined.

I began to share my experiences with the world by doing speaking engagements at local schools and organizations. I also spoke at TEDx Detroit, which is a Ted Talk platform. These opportunities came with meeting some very influential people who were all willing to extend themselves to me and advise me on how to move forward with life now that I was home. My best days were in front of me. I had to find a way to reach people and it didn't

take long before I began to start putting some of those ideas and plans together, I had while locked away. It all started with a Sports Performance and Fitness Training service business and apparel line, Brown Elite. But, I wanted to be a helpmeet to the world also, so the next thing I created was where my heart truly resided. I felt it was what I would do to positively impact people outside of speaking words of love and light to them. With the help of my family and friends, a nonprofit organization was created, the Brown Elite Youth Elevation Foundation. A youth and community empowerment organization that uplifts the youth and all those within the community by providing the tools and resources essential for a prosperous future.

My mother and I also began to help families of other people who were imprisoned abroad. My family and I had to endure a lengthy process that none of us wanted anyone else to experience and our desire to prevent other families from experiencing the same pain we did led us to come to the aid of those who needed it most. This initiative has led to multiple Americans being released without having to spend all of their lives behind bars in foreign countries.

Soon after, I received a call from Ball State University and was told I would be inducted into the university's Sports Hall of Fame. I was invited to dinner and a ceremony where my entire 2008 football team from my senior season was being inducted into the Hall of Fame for having the best regular season in school history. That team, at one point was ranked #12 in the nation and it was a great celebration. I got a chance to see many of my college teammates, coaches, trainers and staff whom I hadn't seen in many years. I thanked God that I was present for such a great moment. What made it even better was my son Wendell Jr being able to also be a part of a great event that many people very rarely get to experience.

The lives of every person on the planet would drastically change as the world experienced a global pandemic. The COVID-19 coronavirus shut the world down completely which led to the loss of jobs, homes, and more precious than anything else, the loss of loved ones. Everyone was forced to alter their way of living and adjust to what would be the new normal. Family time would never be the same as people were encouraged to not leave their homes nor visit others. People who contracted the virus would be admitted to the hospitals and families were not permitted to visit relatives in fear of contracting and spreading the virus. Just as I began to get adjusted to living life outside as a free man, I along with the rest of the world went on lockdown. Frustrated, after going from one lockdown to another, just in a different country, I chose to readjust my mind. I began to see the lockdown in a different light. I looked at it as an opportunity to connect with my family on a more intimate level. We had been away from each other for so long, but I could now spend time with those closest to me, uninterrupted. Instead of being locked down among strangers and violent criminals, I was now locked down with those who loved me most.

I felt like I was in a rush to rebuild my life, but I couldn't help it. For so long all I could do was think of and write down the things I wanted to accomplish. I was now able to act upon these thoughts and ideas. While doing so the world had been flipped upside down but I felt I was given a chance to cherish and appreciate those I missed most while I was away. I was forced just for a second to step away from my ambitious thoughts. I knew i

couldn't take my loved ones for granted. A lot of people's lives were changing daily, and seeing people pass away so often was another reminder to me of how precious life is. In a moments time, everything we know can be altered. My family and I were shut in and engaging in much meaningful conversation. We began to learn about the growth that had taken place with each other over the years that we weren't physically present in each other's lives. My mother's heart and mind were finally at ease now. She could sleep at night in peace as her worries had faded away with my presence.

While everyone adjusted to living life during a global pandemic, my training service had to be completely virtual. I also began to work closer with my mentor and his organization. I had helped coach with the football academy previously but now no one was allowed to meet in person. We started a literacy program for high school students to combat the poor literacy rate amongst students in the city of Detroit. The program consisted of a daily call with a mentor, an hour of tutoring each day, and a virtual fitness session three times a week. The program yielded great results as more than 80% of its participants increased their reading levels. I was learning many new skills from my mentor and he was helping me put more plans in motion for my future. The program ran as the world began to open up a bit and some of the virtual meetings and phone calls were allowed to be face to face, as long as we met state mandates with face coverings and social distancing. To reward the young people for their efforts and improvement, we took them on many trips that ranged from college campus tours to ferry rides on Mackinac Island.

As time went on restrictions for how those within the world were allowed to maneuver in their everyday lives began to be more lenient. My training service picked back up again and I also began to coach more. I coached one football academies 7 on 7 team along with continuing the work I was doing with my mentor and his organization. I was offered a position as a program director and we held many camps and college tours across the nation which aided numerous young men in receiving college scholarship opportunities. I received an opportunity to coach on the staff at my alma mater, Detroit's Martin Luther King Jr. Sr. High School. It would be my second stint at the school and I was brought on board to help coach the linebacker position, along with being the strength and conditioning coordinator. The year was a huge success for our young men as the team went on to finish with a 13-1 record. We won the city championship, state championship, and finished the season ranked as the 38th best high school football team in the nation out of 16,000 schools. What was an even greater feat was 39 of the 52 varsity players finished the year with a 3.0 or higher-grade point average and every senior on the team would go on to college to further their education.

Faith in God, positive energy, positive people, and love for all these things continue to carry me today. Just as they carried me through my youth to manhood, and also through those three long years as a political prisoner. I did many things throughout my life to elevate me beyond where I may have physically been at the moment. While imprisoned these practices were extremely important when it came to keeping my sanity. Thinking positive thoughts, writing those thoughts down, being grateful, focusing on the good, and finding humor in situations were all important. Positive self-talk, and visualizing great things were just a few things I did daily throughout my life to strengthen me. The

practicing of visualization helped me most. The combination of having an optimistic mindset with positive thoughts flowing within, allows one to see and focus solely on good outcomes, even when adversity arises. Believe you will overcome that adversity and you will indeed persevere.

I still visualize beautiful things daily. Whether it's how my day will go, or the impact I will make on the world. This practice helps tremendously for many reasons. In order to successfully envision beautiful things, you must first stay calm and at ease. It assists in keeping you at peace and also aware of the infinite beautiful possibilities you have when you live in the present moment, with hope in the magnificent future you desire. I always aim to do things that are for the betterment of others but there is so much more I desire for people. Those who are going through hard times whether it be due to lack of resources or lack of receiving justice!

I know our thoughts have the power to either cause illness or healing. In the same sense our minds have great power which can encage or liberate us. I choose liberation and my destiny is not only being lived daily but it is expanding and evolving. I've been given a heart, mind, and desire to unify people from all corners of the earth. A desire that burns to spread love and light all over the world. And, As God propels us over one wall, we receive more knowledge, more strength, and more grace to overcome adversity. Daily our wings are growing bigger and stronger as we are gaining every tool needed to truly be *FREE!*



Official's timeout to take a selfie with chain crew in China



Wendell sharing a precious moment with Chinese Youth



Wendell and Officers who helped him through visa complications at Shenzhen airport

BROWN ELITE & CHECK ROCK

PRESENT





MAY 28 CHONGQING
 二郎爱动天空大球场
Erlang I do sport football center

MAY 29- CHENGDU
 静安路290号 (沸腾足球俱乐部)

AGES: 6-12 - RMB 300
 TIME: 10-11:15AM

AGES: 13+ - RMB 500
 TIME: 11:30-1PM

PRACTICING WITH THE PROS

跟职业球员一起训练 橄榄球基础技能训练营
Fundamentals and Skills Football Camp




Wendell Brown

Advertisement for 2 city camp held by Wendell in China



Wendell having fun with youth at football camp in China



Wendell giving lecture at American Embassy in China



Wendell giving lecture at American Embassy in China



Halftime corrections and speech to players coached by Wendell in China



Wendell holding group fitness session in China



Picture break with children at football camp in China



Wendell and others preparing to officiate a football game in China



Wendell with Chinese youth after coaching basketball camp



Wendell with Chinese youth after coaching basketball camp



Riding with Chinese youth to weekend long camp



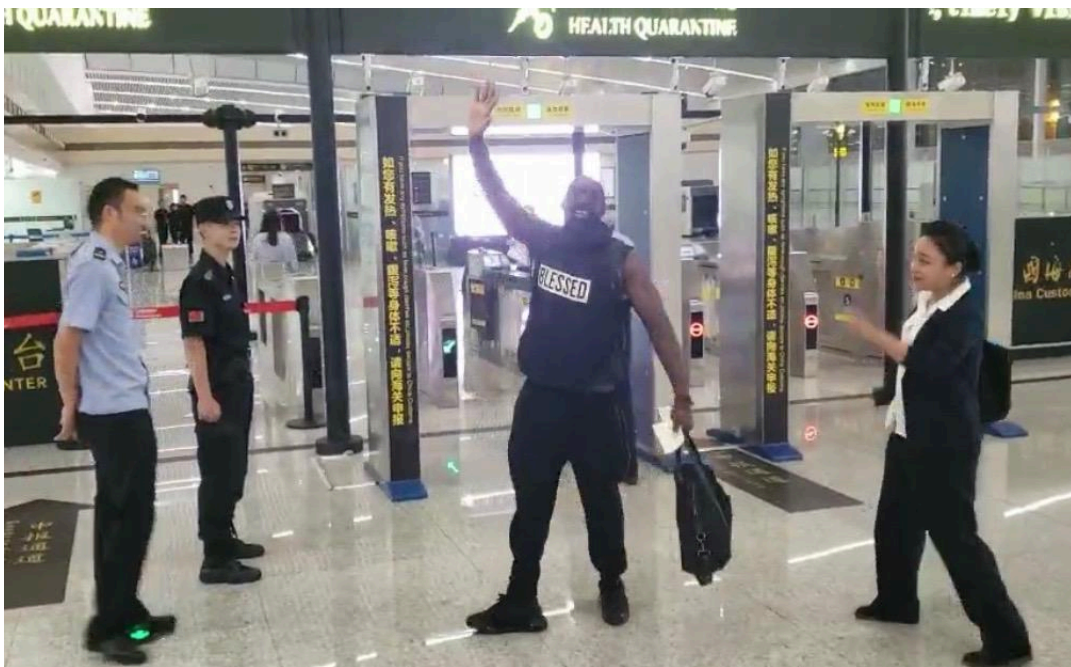
Wendell standing on Trial opposing false charges in China



Wendell hugging his mother for the first time after 3 years of imprisonment



News and media outlets along with family and friends meet Wendell at the airport in Detroit upon his release from Chinese prison



Wendell waves goodbye to friends at Chinese airport after release from prison



Wendell, 2 mentees, and Wendell Jr, on the sidelines of University of Michigan football game



Wendell and nephew wearing Brown Elite brand



Friends in China meet Wendell at the airport immediately after release from prison



Wendell holding outdoor fitness session in China



Wendell and Wendell Jr.



Wendell and Wendell Jr at Ball State Hall of Fame banquet



Wendell, his mother and aunt at welcome home honoring



Wendell's Ball State teammates and alum with his mother at Los Angeles airport



Wendell's family at Chinese Embassy protesting for his release



Wendell Celebrating release from Chinese Prison with family at Los Angeles Airport



Wendell with mentee and college roommate after bowl game victory



Wendell with Detroit King players and coaches after 2021 state championship victory



Wendell in handmade prison LeBron James Los Angeles Lakers jersey



Wendell preparing to speak at Ted Talk platform TEDx Detroit

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tYijlxFMbIQ>



Wendell L. Brown Sr. is the Founder and President of Brown Elite Youth Elevation Foundation. A 501c3 nonprofit youth and community empowerment organization that specializes in providing young men and women with mentoring, tutoring, leadership and life skills courses, along with athletic and academic college scholarship opportunities. Wendell is also the Owner and CEO of Brown Elite a Sports Performance & Fitness Training Company. He is currently a program director and coach with the Sound Mind Sound Body Football Academy, Coach for Michigan Elite Football Club, and the strength and conditioning coordinator, and linebacker coach for the state of Michigan's #1 ranked and #38 nationally ranked, Detroit Martin L. King Jr. Senior High School, football team.

More Info Available at

www.BrownElite.org

www.WendellBrownSr.com

