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URBAN
UNDERGROUND

To Be a **MAN**

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CHAPTER ONE

Trevor Jenkins let the door slam when he got home. Mickey Jenkins, his mother, yelled at him, “What you doin’ comin’ two hours late from school? What you been doin’, boy?”

“Ma,” Trevor groaned, his hands tensing into fists. He felt like punching a hole in the kitchen wall to let out some of his frustration. “I told you—we had track practice after school. Coach Curry is getting us ready for the meet against Lincoln.” Trevor thought to himself that he couldn’t take much more of this. Ma was worse than a warden at a maximum security lockup.

Mickey Jenkins came around the corner with the angry frown she always wore on

her face. She was tall for a woman, a bit over six feet. She was all hard muscle, no fat. Her appearance brought to mind a tough length of leather. She worked as a nurse's aide in a rest home, and she could lift the patients, even men, with ease.

Trevor remembered being afraid of his mother all his life. It wasn't any better now that he was sixteen. But it hurt more, especially his pride.

“You never said it's gonna take you all of two hours, boy,” his mother scolded. “Don't you be lyin' to me. I won't have that. I don't want you hanging around with your lowlife friends after school, you hear what I'm sayin'?”

She had raised her four sons without a husband. He had run off when the oldest was a little more than five and the youngest was a baby. She always swore she would raise her sons to be good, honorable men, even if she had to whup them every day, and she often did. Her eldest, Desmond, was now in the United States Army. A picture of him,

a handsome young man proudly wearing his uniform, hung from the living room wall. He would soon be joined there by her second oldest, Junior, who was in boot camp. Tommy, who was a couple of years older than Trevor, was a freshman in City College. None of the Jenkins boys had ever gotten into trouble with the law, and Mickey Jenkins meant to keep it that way.

“I got no lowlife friends, Ma,” Trevor protested. “I hang with Jaris and Derrick, and you’ve known those guys all my life. I grew up with them,” Trevor dropped his school books on the floor. “You also know Kevin. He’s a great guy.”

“Don’t be havin’ no temper tantrums on me, boy,” his mother said sharply. “You know well as me what I meant by lowlife friends. Jaris and Derrick and that Texas boy, Kevin, they’re good kids. I got no problem with them. I’m talkin’ about that hussy you been eyeballin’ down at the yogurt shop.”

Trevor stiffened. There *was* a pretty girl working at the Ice House, the new yogurt shop. Her name was Vanessa Allen, and she was beautiful. She had dyed dark red hair that looked beautiful with her cocoa-colored skin. Trevor never had had a girlfriend because his mother didn't believe in teenagers dating. Trevor had talked to Vanessa a few times and he liked her. She seemed to like him too. Vanessa had dropped out of Tubman High at the beginning of her sophomore year, and Ma considered all high school dropouts to be trash. "I don't know what you're talking about, Ma," Trevor lied.

"Y'know darn well what I'm talkin' about," Ma insisted. "Don't dummy up on me, boy. You gettin' hot and heavy with that trashy redhead works at the yogurt shop, that Allen girl. She's so bad she don't even live with her parents no more. She's only sixteen, and she's bad through and through."

"I'm not 'hot and heavy' with anybody, Ma," Trevor argued. "I went in a coupla

times to get a frozen yogurt and she waited on me.” Trevor wanted to scream. He loved his mother and he knew she loved him and his brothers. But she ran the house like a jailer, demanding to know where Trevor was every minute of the day. It had been the same with all the brothers, but the older ones had gone into the army, and she eased up on Tommy when he started college. Now she was able to give her full attention to Trevor.

“That no-good Allen girl,” Mickey Jenkins ranted, “she lives with her trashy sister, and she can run wild there. Bad sorts comin’ and goin’ there all the time. I know what I’m talkin’ about. I’m no fool, boy. Nobody pulls wool over my eyes. When your no-good Daddy walked out on us, I had four babies—four baby boys!—and I brought you all up by my own hard work. Army makin’ men out of Desmond and Junior, but I still got work to do with you and Tommy, especially you, boy. You could go either way.”

Trevor felt like the walls were closing in on him, threatening to squeeze him until he couldn't breathe. Anger was boiling up inside him. "Ma," Trevor pleaded, "I never been in trouble. I'm making good grades at Tubman. You can ask my teachers. I get along good with all of them. I never cause any hassles. Ma, can't you just get off my back for two minutes?"

Mickey Jenkins came closer to her tall, handsome son. "Boy, don't you talk to me in that tone of voice. I can still whup you up one side of your head and down the other, and you better believe it."

"I'm sorry, Ma," Trevor apologized, "but I just had a long track practice, and I'm tired. I need to do my homework, and you're screaming at me like I'm some criminal. Ma, you win! I mean, you got me whipped, okay? I don't even have the courage to buy a sandwich at school. I eat those hideous tuna fish sandwiches you make, those disgusting things. I eat them 'cause I'm scared of you."

“You remember the baggie, boy?” Ma asked, dragging out her most potent weapon.

“Oh man!” Trevor groaned, “I was like eleven years old, and I didn’t even know what it was when the kid gave it to me to hold. You gonna throw that in my face again?”

“You were wild in those days, Trevor,” Ma told him. “I had to be tough. Remember—I told you if I ever find a baggie on you again I’d kill you?”

“You gonna be throwing that at me when I’m an old man, Ma?” Trevor asked bitterly.

“I won’t be around when you’re an old man, boy,” Ma declared. “I work sixteen hours a day for you and your brothers. The army is feeding Desmond and Junior right now, but I still got to see you and Tommy raised right. I don’t ask for nothin’ more than that. Every Sunday I go to the Holiness Awakening Church, and I ask God for nothin’ more than to let my sons grow up good and decent men.”

“I know, Ma,” Trevor responded. “I’m doing my best.”

“Okay,” Ma said. “Just make sure you don’t never lie to me about where you are. That’s the beginning of trouble. When the kids start lying and tellin’ stories. Next thing you know, the police are at the door telling you your child is in custody, or he’s down at the hospital or the morgue ’cause he was drivin’ drunk.”

Trevor headed for his room. He felt like a steamroller had run over him. He grabbed his cell phone and called Jaris.

“Hey man, Ma is really on the warpath tonight,” Trevor said.

Jaris was Trevor’s closest friend. If you were Jaris’s friend, he had your back. “Why?” Jaris asked, “What’s going down, Trev?”

“I was late coming home from school ’cause of track practice,” Trevor explained. “Coach Curry ran us longer than usual. She’s like giving me the third degree, man. I don’t know how much more of this stuff I can take. I’m coming in the door, and

there's this fierce-looking woman who's my ma, and she looks like she's gonna take me down, man."

"Take it easy, dude," Jaris said. "Just hang in there. You'll be okay. Your mom probably had a bad day. She's got a rough job. Being tired makes some people mean."

"Easy for you to say, dude," Trevor replied. "You got nice, sane parents. You got a fun mom and a great dad. I think Ma is crazy sometimes."

"No, she's not crazy, man," Jaris told him. "She just loves you guys so much, and she's scared the streets will get you. They get a lot of guys. When your dad cut out, it made her hard and angry."

"Lousy bum!" Trevor said of his father. Trevor was a baby when his dad left, so he had no memories of his father. From time to time Trevor would see him on the street, often drunk, asking people for change for cigarettes or a bottle of wine.

"You still see your dad around?" Jaris asked.