

Chapter 1



The \$4 million Nike athletic-shoe contract in Shandell Bird's shirt pocket wasn't about to solve his problem—couldn't even put a dent in it—and neither would the \$3.2 million he expected to start drawing in October, once the NBA season started. All that money, more money than he suspected any human being was worth, would only add to his problem. Somehow, deep down, he'd always known that.

Months removed from being one of the nation's elite college basketball players, he was now a big-money pro and celebrity, and there seemed to be no way to step away from the limelight. In a sense, he was fortunate that he had to worry about only \$7 million and change, not three or four times that, like an NFL draftee. In the NFL the sky was the limit, and salaries weren't limited as they were in the NBA by a rookie scale that was pegged to where a player had been picked in the draft. Although the money tied to his contract wouldn't begin to roll in until he arrived at training camp in October, six and a half weeks down the road, he knew there was no way he'd be trouble free by then. Training camp would only serve to magnify his problems.

Amid NBA draft-day pomp and circumstance, the Denver Nuggets had made him the second overall pick in the draft, assuring him that once the ink was dry on his rookie-year contract, which he'd signed only weeks earlier, the dream he'd been chasing since fourth grade would be his.

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Jittery and sweating, “Blackbird,” as he was known throughout the sports world, found himself thinking, *Money don’t buy you love*, as he uncoiled his six-foot-eight-inch, 250-pound frame from behind the steering wheel of the \$93,000 Range Rover he’d bought just days earlier. He was about to make the bank deposit of a lifetime.

The shoe-contract money in his pocket, small potatoes in the professional athlete endorsement game, which he’d requested (much to the chagrin of his agent) be issued as a cashier’s check rather than by wire transfer so it could be photocopied and savored for posterity, hadn’t yet arrived when he’d bought the Range Rover. But no one at the dealership where he’d purchased the car—not the salesman, the manager, nor the head of the financial department—had batted an eye at letting him walk out the door a few minutes before closing time into gathering darkness and drive off in the options-loaded SUV. He’d bought the car on the strength of a handshake and the single word “Blackbird” scrawled near the bottom of a hastily drawn-up contract.

For years he’d wanted a white Range Rover, had even salivated at the idea, but his girlfriend, Connie Eastland, had insisted he’d look better in black. “Fits your image better,” she’d claimed. “Gets to the heart of who you are on the court.” Armed with Connie’s advice and the endorsement of his best friend since grade school and his former Colorado State University teammate, Damion Madrid, he’d left the dealership in an ebony metallic Range Rover that screamed to the world, *Blackbird here! I’m soaring!*

Nike was already well on its corporate way to selling the public the branding package it had developed for him. The image of a soaring raven was emblazoned high on the outside ankle wall of every one of the \$180 pairs of sneakers it sold under his name. He was

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“Blackbird” now, the corporate suits he lunched with never missed reminding him. He was no longer, nor could he ever return to being, the lanky, introverted black kid from Denver’s Five Points neighborhood. It was time for him to play the part, shoulder his share of the load, and walk the walk he’d been paid \$7.2 million for. He was destined to become a household name, an eye-level product on Nike and the NBA’s supermarket shelf. He was an energy drink in the offing, a high-end vehicle endorsement—hell, he’d even heard some of the suits whisper that his name could one day be as recognizable as the Coca-Cola brand.

The Nike suits and their NBA counterparts also seemed to enjoy reminding him, and never in a whisper, that they expected him to stay in character at all times. His image, and by inference theirs, would be reflected to the world by his behavior, he’d been told over and over at his Nuggets and his endorsement contract signings. With his head bent low over the signature pages as Julie Madrid, his attorney and Damion Madrid’s mother, and his own mother, Aretha, looked on, he’d never looked up at those signings, thinking that he was selling a piece of his soul. Only Damion, who’d watched from across the room, recognized that what most people would have perceived as a festive occasion was causing Shandell pain.

Stretching and glancing skyward before walking away from the Range Rover, Shandell moved quickly across the always crowded parking lot of the Guaranty Bank in Denver’s trendy Cherry Creek shopping district.

“Got Blackbird in the house,” the guard sitting inside at one side of the revolving door called across the lobby to a line of four instantly attentive tellers as Shandell strolled in.

Shandell nodded at the moonlighting Denver cop, smiled, and

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tapped his left fist against the bank guard's. "Ready for training camp?" the cop asked excitedly.

"Yeah," Shandell responded, heading for the nearest teller.

"Well, give 'em what for. Time to let folks on the coasts know we play basketball out here in the Rockies too."

"Sure will." Shandell stepped up to the closest teller and smiled. "Need to deposit this." He nudged the deposit slip and check across a marble countertop. The thin-faced teller, a dark-haired woman who'd emigrated from Russia five years earlier, eyed Shandell, a bank regular, and smiled back. She'd always liked the aloof African American giant with the shaved head, Dumbo ears, and fuzzy growth of mustache that never seemed to fully take hold. He was always polite in a refreshingly un-American way. He also seemed always frustrated, even sad, as if he were chasing something he couldn't quite catch, whenever he visited her window. As Shandell leaned down to meet her gaze, she suddenly had the distinct feeling that he was about to confide in her. When, however, he remained silent, she checked the endorsement on the back of the check and, unfazed by the amount, logged in the deposit.

"Thank you," she said softly, handing Shandell a receipt. Watching Shandell stuff the receipt into his shirt pocket, she asked sheepishly, "How long before your basketball games start?"

"A couple of months." His response was mechanical.

"You'll do good," the teller said reassuringly as Shandell flashed her a parting smile and pivoted to leave. On his way out, he gave the bank guard a halfhearted high five before stepping out into the bright noonday sun. It was a picture-postcard Mile High City late-summer day, but the undeniable crispness in the air announced that autumn, always a time of renewal for Shandell, and his favorite time

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of the year, was on the way. For him, fall had always meant a return to school and friends after a summer filled with loneliness, save for his friendship with Damion Madrid and his recent romance with Connie Eastland.

Now, instead of returning to the security of high school or a college campus, he was headed for a grueling job that started in October and, depending on how the Nuggets' season fared, might not end until the NBA playoffs the following June. A job in which his every action would be scrutinized and his deepest thoughts dissected. He would be talked about and written about, idolized and put down, and regardless of what he'd told Nike and the Nuggets, he wasn't at all certain how he'd react to that kind of scrutiny. All he could do, as his mother so often put it, was go with the flow. He'd spent most of his twenty-two years climbing a mountain that would have been insurmountable for most human beings, and now that he was at the top, he wasn't sure he wanted to be in a place where the whole world could see him, and only him.

As he slipped into the Range Rover to head home, he had the feeling that Damion, who'd passed on the NBA to head for medical school and a life away from the limelight, might have chosen the better path. Without Damion there to offer him guidance, he knew that for the first time in a very long while, he'd pretty much be on his own.

Moments after he started the engine, his cell phone chirped out its Connie Eastland-programmed aviary ring tone. "Bird here," he said, responding quickly.

The person on the other end of the line chuckled. "See you're at the bank. Puttin' in or takin' out?"

"Who's this?"

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“You know who it is, Blackbird. Your guardian angel—and we need to talk.”

Shandell opened his door, stepped out of the vehicle, and looked around only to hear the person he was talking to laugh. “Too late for looking, friend. You should’ve done that long ago.” Still chuckling, the caller added in the singsong voice of a tattletale child, “I know something you don’t know. So when do we talk, Mr. Number-Two Draft Choice?”

With his cell phone pressed to his ear as he continued to scan the parking lot’s perimeter, Shandell weakly asked, “This evening?”

“What time?”

“Seven.” Shandell’s response was a nervous half-whisper.

“Where?”

“The Glendale courts,” Shandell said without hesitation. “Across from the post office.”

“I know where they are, friend. Seven o’clock, then. See you there.”

The line went dead as Shandell stared into the distance, looking flustered. Several heart-pounding moments later, he sighed, gritted his teeth, and slipped back into his vehicle. Almost as an afterthought, he plucked the bank-deposit slip out of his shirt pocket and eyed it briefly before wadding it into a ball and tossing it onto the floor. Backing out of his parking space, he drove out of the parking lot, slipped his cell phone’s earpiece into his ear, and hastily dialed a number. When the person on the other end answered, sounding groggy and half asleep, Shandell said, “It’s showtime. Seven o’clock. The Glendale courts. Don’t be late.” He hung up and sped east on First Avenue, his back to the snow-capped Rockies.