NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF ALL THE SINNERS BLEED A NOVEL 

## KING OF ASHES



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**Table of Contents** 

About the Author

Copyright Page

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This one is for Todd Robinson. Long live the thugs.

## Memory believes before knowing remembers. Believes longer than recollects, longer than knowing even wonders.

—WILLIAM FAULKNER

All empires are created of blood and fire.

—PABLO ESCOBAR

## **CHAPTER ONE**

He dreams of his mother.

Her mahogany skin is deeper and darker in the sepia-tone filter that diffuses the cinematography of his dream. Her eyes, deep and wide, sparkle at him like fireflies. Her hair, cut short in the back and curly on the top, seems to glisten as well. She is wearing the nurse scrubs he last saw her in that day. The cuff of her left pants leg has minute drops of blood like an abstract henna tattoo.

In his dream he reaches out his hand, not the hand with the twelve-thousand-dollar watch but his sixteen-year-old self's hand. And before he can touch her, she fades away like an instant photo moving in reverse.

And then he wakes up with her name on his lips.

The taste of the woman lying next to him waits there too. Waits for his tongue and shame to find her flavor. She turns and throws one finely muscled light brown thigh over his own and murmurs his name.

"Roman."

It comes out with the solemnity of a prayer. He rolls over, away from her. He knows her stage name, but it escapes him at the moment.

"Hmmm?"

"We getting breakfast?" she asks. They shift in the bed, changing positions until her back is against his chest and her legs are drawn up nearly to her chest.

Roman closes his eyes and takes a deep breath. "Hmm," he murmurs. He puts his hand on the small of her back and makes light circles with his fingertips.

"Can we go to Mammy's? I'm starving," she whispers. Her name escapes him, but he can see it in his mind. The letters are jumbled, like one of the puzzles in the paper his mother used to like to solve.

She turns to him and he sees the delicate curve of her chin and fullness of her lips. She smiles, and her bright blue eyes seem to sparkle at him. He'd asked her

if they were contacts and she'd playfully punched him. Her eyes were as bright as ...

Saffire. Her name is Saffire. Her friend's name was Genesis. She was in his guest room with his friend Khalil. All of them had been guests at a release party for Lil Glock 9's new single. A party put together by his label to gin up interest for his new song that was debuting on all major streaming platforms. Roman knew the party was more a formality for Lil Glock's fans. An excuse for them to prostrate themselves at the feet of their idol. There wasn't really any money in streaming. It was the concerts and tours where he really cleaned up, and even that wasn't the gold ring it used to be. Roman's wealth management firm had helped Lil Glock 9, whose real name was Franklin Parrish, maximize his earnings while keeping him out of the crosshairs of the IRS. That maximization required more and more creative accounting over the years as record labels took more and more of the pie from recording artists, and recording artists like Lil Glock went to great lengths to pretend they were still at the head of the table.

Roman vaguely remembered Khalil introducing Saffire before they were zooming down Decatur in Roman's Porsche heading for his condo.

My 2012 Porsche, he thought. He preached fiscal responsibility to his clients, but not many of them wanted to drive a ten-year-old Porsche or use rented jewelry for social engagements or video shoots. Roman knew he had to present a certain persona as a money manager in one of the richest cities in America, but he didn't intend to put himself in the poorhouse in service to that image.

"I ain't renting a damn thing. I wanna own my shit," Lil Glock had said, even as Roman tried to explain the concept of depreciation.

Roman heard a man's voice, then a woman's laughter, from the living room. Khalil and Genesis were awake as well. A few seconds later there was a knock on his bedroom door.

"Hey, Rome, we about to dip and get something to eat. Y'all wanna come with?" Khalil said. Roman could envision him on the other side of the door rapping his huge tattooed knuckles against the wood, his wide frame nearly blocking out the door. Khalil did security for many of Atlanta's upper-class elites. He moved through their world like a dolphin gliding through water playing savior for a lost sailor, but Roman knew what those tattoos stood for, and knew Khalil wasn't a dolphin. He was a shark.

"Yeah, just let me get—" he started to say, but the ringtone from his phone cut him off midsentence. He extricated himself from Saffire's thighs and got his

phone off the nightstand. The morning sun was climbing over the downtown Atlanta skyline, lighting it like the flame from an oil lantern. He looked down at the touch screen as "Für Elise" played.

It was Neveah.

Roman took a deep breath and answered the phone. It was going to be bad. She never called unless it was bad. He could count on that like the rising of the sun that was now casting his shadow across his king-sized bed.

"Hey. What's up?" he said.

"It's Daddy. He's been in an accident. He's in a coma. You should probably come home, Rome," she said, her voice not rising above a whisper.

Roman left Khalil and the girls at his penthouse and went downtown to where the offices of Carruthers and Associates held court among the numerous financial investment firms that seemed to spring up overnight in Atlanta like magic beanstalks.

"Have Simon take my meeting with that new singer from Sony," Roman said to his assistant Keisha as she furiously took notes on a tablet. "Have Gary and Nick take on the meeting with the two new Housewives of Atlanta. Reschedule the meeting with Elian Rhodes. I don't want anyone but me talking to him. The Falcons have serious concerns about his spending habits. Cancel my follow-up with Lil Glock 9. Postpone my meeting with the Kee Law Group. And don't let anyone talk to the president of Morehouse until I get back."

"How long do you anticipate being gone?" she asked.

Roman had paused. "Long enough to make sure my daddy isn't going to die."

\* \* \*

His flight didn't take off until 8:00 P.M. That was the earliest one he could get, even though he lived in one of Delta Air Lines' major hubs. He'd had time to pack, he'd handled his work responsibilities, and he'd given Khalil his spare key. He was all set to go home.

He just had one more stop to make.

He checked his watch. He'd arrived on time for his appointment, but it was now ten minutes past the time they had agreed on. He knew it was all part of the experience, but it still annoyed him a little.

He was sitting in the exquisitely understated anteroom of a high-end twostory classic colonial-style house at the end of an exclusive cul-de-sac just off of Peach Tree Road in Buckhead. A New Age instrumental song was playing over hidden speakers as barely noticeable incense burned in both corners. Roman tapped his knee with his index finger as the music reached a crescendo.

Finally, Miss Delicate came through the door.

She was tall, nearly as tall as Roman, which made her close to six feet. Her dark skin was smooth as a night gone black. A long, thick black braid spilled down her back to her firm, rounded backside. Roman pegged her age at around forty-five or fifty. It was hard to tell. Her face was bereft of wrinkles and her body was more toned than the woman he had spent the night with just a few hours ago. If she was fifty, that made her exactly fifteen years older than him.

He liked that. Or, more accurately, he needed that.

"You can come back now," she said. Her voice was conversational in tone but direct and implacable.

"Yes, Mama," Roman said with a tongue that felt like a roll of cotton.

The cuffs bit into his wrists just enough so he knew they were there. They didn't hurt, not really. The pain, real pain, would come later. The sting from the restraints was an almost welcome sensation. A familiar feeling that made him comfortable even as his breath began to come in rapid-fire gasps. He wasn't afraid. They had a firm safe word. Miss Delicate would release him the moment he uttered that word. The moment it flowed from his lips he'd be free.

Physically, at least.

But there was a place in his mind, between the shadows of his desire and the sunset of his self-loathing where time slowed and the real world fell away, where the safe word didn't work. Where Miss Delicate ignored his protestations. Where he was given what he craved in the deepest, darkest caverns of his heart.

Penance. Punishment. Absolution.

Usually he only had an appointment here once a month, unless he was having a particularly stressful week, like when one of his clients tried to convince him to invest all his savings, nearly forty million dollars, into a cryptocurrency corporation. It was during those times, when he felt like Atlas carrying the full weight of his clients' lives, their legacies, their earned or unearned prosperity on his shoulders, that he came here for a "supplemental" appointment.

He knew that in many ways he was the stereotypical client for someone like Miss Delicate. A rich businessman who wants to give up the power he wields so blithely during his workday and surrender to the control of another. And, if he was being honest, that was definitely a part of it. But in reality, that was a small part of why he came here, why he sought out a place like this. It wasn't about sex. It was sexual, yes, but it wasn't sex. Sexuality was just the pen they used to write the story he needed to read again and again.

The story where he stops his mother from leaving the house that day and vanishing without a trace. The folktale where he is the classical hero that stops his mother from disappearing like the morning dew in the light of the rising sun.

Miss Delicate walked around the Saint Andrew's Cross, her stiletto heels making a sharp report with every step. When she stopped, she was behind him. He could feel her breath on his neck.

"Are you sorry? Are you sorry for being such a worthless son?" Miss Delicate said. Her voice was deeper than it had been in the anteroom. It was melodious and rich.

An angel with a black halo.

"I'm sorry, Mama," Roman whispered.

Miss Delicate walked back in front of him. She was carrying a cat-o'-nine-tails. She unfurled it and the leather straps sounded like the dry, whispery wings of a bat.

"I don't believe you," she said.

\* \* \*

An hour later, Roman was buttoning his light blue Blugiallo shirt as Miss Delicate, not her Christian name, was putting away her toys under the soft pink LED lights that lined the ceiling along the cove molding. Roman often thought her setup was less Gothic dungeon and more salacious boudoir.

With a cat-o'-nine-tails.

Roman cleared his throat. "I need to cancel next week's session. My dad was in a car accident. I need to go back to Virginia. I don't know for how long," he said softly.

Miss Delicate sucked at her teeth.

"And yet you came here before getting on a plane and going to your father's bedside?" she asked.

Roman felt his cheeks begin to burn. "Yes. I ... There's just ... I don't go home a lot. There are bad memories there. This helps me deal with them," he said.

She walked over to him, black stiletto heels tapping. She stood in front of him, staring into his eyes. He could smell her sweat. He'd asked for and had

received an intense session. Beneath her sweat he could smell her body wash or soap. And beneath that was her natural scent. Raw and intoxicating.

"The session is over, but consider this a professional courtesy. You will never forgive yourself if something were to happen to your father while you were here. And you already have a problem with forgiveness," she said in a low voice.

She leaned forward and whispered in his ear.

"You like to create situations where you need to be punished. Even if you have to punish yourself. This isn't one of those situations. This is your father. Go. Now," she said.

"I am, I just wanted to ... I needed—" he started to say, but she cut him off with one raised eyebrow.

"It wasn't a request," she said sharply.

\* \* \*

Now, hours later, he was sitting in first class sipping a Jameson on the rocks from a plastic cup as the flight attendants went over the safety protocols, which always struck Roman as a bit ridiculous. Seat belts on a plane were like helmets during a skydive. They mainly existed to make you feel better about this incredibly dangerous journey you were embarking upon. When it was the human body versus the ground, the ground was undefeated.

He finished his drink and closed his eyes. He thought about the power of tragedies. How they came into your life unbidden and upended your world without any care or concern. He'd once dated a woman who was a theoretical physicist. She would lie on his chest after making love and tell him about her kids, who were nearly his age, or her latest article in a scientific journal, but one night she started talking about the nature of the universe in almost biblical tones.

"I used to be afraid the universe was evil. Now I almost wish it was. Because evil can be bargained with, evil has a purpose, no matter how horrible it may be. But what I've come to realize is the universe is indifferent, and that is so much more terrifying," she had said.

As the plane taxied down the runway, Roman thought he disagreed with her assessment. The universe was both evil and indifferent. It was both horrific and idiotically apathetic. It was like a god that strode through time and space full of anger and bereft of concern.

Behind his closed eyes a movie played starring his mother, missing now for nineteen years, and his father. He saw them both fading away, turned to dust and lost in the wind as the universe shrugged and continued on its way.