

# THE LAMP

The Lamp Series  
Book One

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The Island of Ted

All American Addict

The Lamp Series

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# **Phantom Fiction**

**P U B L I S H I N G**

**Nashville**



I dedicate this book to my readers. May you find strength as we journey through this life together.



“There is scarcely any passion without struggle.”

— Albert Camus

“There is a time for reciting poems and a time for fists.”

— Roberto Bolaño





## CHAPTER 1

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THE LANDSCAPE WAS urban — a pile of tall buildings set against glass waters glimmering beyond a concrete divide. The breezy night air blew newspaper leaflets across shadowy, rain-slicked streets that were smeared with a rainbow of neon. High, ornate streetlights provided splotches of relief in intervals along the asphalt. The air smelled of damp garbage and car exhaust.

A beat-up, rusty sedan slowed to a creeping halt between graffiti-laden brick buildings, smoke clouds pluming from underneath the hood. The door fell open with a groan and two designer shoes emerged to meet the wet pavement. Levi's face bore no emotion as he stepped out of the car and removed his suit jacket, folded it neatly, and placed it on the driver's seat. He circled around to the smoldering hood and unlatched it

to look inside. A sudden noise reverberated among the buildings somewhere behind him, but Levi didn't turn around. He recognized the sound as that of a basketball hitting the ground in measured bounces, its echo spreading across the deserted city block like a war drum thumping outside ancient city gates. Someone was hoping to gain his attention.

Thirty feet from Levi's car stood four imposing figures on the street. The one dribbling the ball was no more than twenty years old, with gothic tattoos inked into his upper arms. The one beside him steadied a box cutter against his side, ready for action. They were the welcoming committee on this side of town, and locals dreaded running into them. The big man dribbled the ball with greater force, inviting a response from the harmless man in the dress shirt and slacks. They wanted to see the fear in his eyes. They wanted to see him sweat, maybe even beg a little, before stabbing him in the chest and walking away with his wallet.

Levi's back remained to them as he hunched over to tighten a loose hose in the engine compartment. The group descended upon him slowly, moving a few steps closer, loose gravel from the busted cement crunching beneath their shoes. Their threatening shadows stretched to the end of the street, ominously covering their victim's form. Levi clapped his dusty hands

together, wiped them on his slacks, then casually turned around and faced the four menacing youths, his posture nonchalant.

A standoff.

The big man with the basketball stared into Levi's eyes and saw something that he didn't like. The air became very still as the lights reflecting off the river splashed the street with purple and green hues. Levi took a deliberate step toward the group, and the big man instantly took a step back. An empty expression hung over Levi's face as he invited the welcoming committee to move closer to him.

The big man swallowed, tapped the guy to his left, and then nodded to the other two. The group turned tail and retreated in the direction in which they had come, each step taken more quickly than the one preceding it. Levi stepped inside his car and fired the engine, which came to life with a deep rumble. He pulled away into the night, heading to a place of rest.

FOUR HOURS EARLIER...

Hinnom Valley Prison  
(Hard Labor Camp)

A prison guard, standing six-foot-three, rapped on the cell bars with his stick as he strolled down a darkened corridor smelling of black mold and pain. Stopping at Levi's cell, he took a deep breath and reached for a ring of keys on his belt. Levi heard the jingle, but ignored it. He knew the drill: inspections and pat-downs at six and nine.

"You're free to go."

That got his attention. Levi rose from his cot, chewing gum.

"Free to go where?"

The guard slid a key into the lock and said, "Turn around and place your forehead against the wall. I'm going to open the door slowly. Do not resist me, Levi."

Levi laced his fingers behind his head and turned toward the brick wall of his cell, placing his forehead against it. The guard took note of Levi's muscular forearms and scarred hands. He shook his head with a sense of amused awareness.

"I never filed an appeal," Levi pointed out.

"Your conviction was overturned. Warden said to get you out of here as quickly as possible. And he emphasized the *quickly* part."

"They don't overturn cases like mine."

"Well," the guard sighed. "They did."

The guard opened the door and approached Levi with grave caution.

"I want the vest," Levi said.

"You don't need it."

"If you're taking me somewhere, I want the vest."

"How about I just hand you my gun; would that earn your trust?"

"It might," Levi answered.

"Sheesh. That's always the problem with you — you don't trust anybody. You don't need a vest, you don't need a gun. No one's going to try anything."

"You think I just fell off a turnip truck, Marty?"

"I just do what I'm told," the guard replied as he placed a pair of cuffs on Levi's thick wrists and led him out of the cell and into the corridor.

Ten minutes later, Levi was standing at the exit station as a tray of items slid into view, underneath a bulletproof partition. He leaned over to view his possessions and felt embarrassed. Someone like him should've had more to his name. A woman in a blue uniform watched him curiously from behind the glass. She was sad to see him go, but didn't know exactly why. All the prison guards knew his reputation, but he spoke to the women like ladies and treated most of the guys like proper gentlemen. *Just don't provoke him.*

She knew that much. She observed him passing a hand over the items, a vulnerable glimmer in his eyes.

“Something wrong, Levi?” she asked.

“Nah,” he responded. “It’s just been a long time, you know?”

He peered down at a silver watch, a leather wallet, designer shoes and a folded suit on the counter in front of him, smiling at old memories.

“Is that everything?” he asked.

“That’s it. Your car was released from impound. Warden even charged and gassed it for you. Might want to change the oil though. It sounded a little rough. Otherwise, you’re clear to go.”

Levi and the woman shared a look, a moment. He then gathered his items, everything he owned, and left Hinnom Valley Prison for good.

• • •

Twenty minutes after facing down four hoods on a windy downtown street, Levi sat in his car, plowing through a giant cheeseburger. He looked orgasmic, and for good reason. It had been seven years since he’d tasted anything with actual flavor, seven years since he’d tasted freedom. Outside his grimy windshield, life was happening: storefront shops packing it in for the

night, sidewalk strollers out for some action, bars still hopping. It all felt unreal to him. *Am I actually free?*

He wadded up the burger sack and tossed it into the passenger seat, then rolled down his window to suck in a deep breath of pungent city air. Not just any air, but the kind that smells like liberty. A strange sense of excitement danced in his chest and he knew that it was real. The nightmare had finally come to an end and going wherever he wanted, whenever he wanted, was no longer a dream inside the walls of a prison camp. He was now free to dwell and mingle among the living.

Levi nursed a free beer at a dive bar which hadn't existed when he'd lived on the outside previously. From the corner of his eye, he noticed two guys and a girl on the opposite end of the room looking in his direction, but trying to avoid being seen. Even over the bad music, he heard the guys prodding one another, saying, "Is that really him?" and, "Are you sure?" That was enough to deflate his mood. Levi dropped a tip and headed for the door. He was too tired to entertain college kids tonight. He needed something he'd been dreaming about for far too long as he wasted away in that dump. *Home.*

Levi pulled his car to the curb of a nice, older brownstone. It was on that very stoop that he'd killed

many afternoons, basking in the energy of a city on the move. He'd rested on the top step with a chilled glass of tea, beside a potted green plant that he'd managed to keep alive for more than a year. The plant was gone now and the black iron handrails leading up to the stoop were chipped and spun with cobwebs.

For a moment, he thought about not even going in but he didn't know where else to go. He had purchased the small apartment home twelve years prior with prize money he'd won from his first fight as a professional. But in that moment, as he gazed at the apartment home through a filthy windshield, it all seemed like a lifetime ago. He was now banned from boxing, penniless, and suffered from deep scars in his soul that he feared would never heal. Then again, he was also a free man.

Levi sat in his car, wondering if it was all a trap. Maybe there was some well-connected enemy who wanted him dead for what he had done. Would he find someone waiting for him inside the apartment, gun loaded and cocked? For all he knew, the pardon was simply a ruse to get him to take a dirt nap outside the jurisdiction of the prison camp. But deep inside, he doubted it. After all, the warden and all the guards liked him for the most part. With the exception of a few



minor scuffles, he had kept to himself and never made a fuss like most of the other inmates.

Not having too many choices at hand, and not feeling up to sleeping in the car, he stepped out into the quiet street and started up a few concrete steps that led to a red door, styled after a castle gate but hinged on one side, and scaled down. That was his one decorative choice. It was now faded from neglect. He removed a key from his pocket and pushed the door open with a bit of effort.

A shaft of light from the street fell onto the hardwood floor, revealing thick dust wafting through stale air. Levi took a creaky step inside and settled his weight. If someone were there to kill him, he'd already be dead. But death was not something that frightened him terribly these days. He thought to try the light switch and grinned. After seven *days* the power company is calling; how much more after seven *years*?

Just for the heck of it, and to quench his boy-like curiosity, he flipped the switch anyway and was immediately bathed in fluorescent light.

"How could that be?" he wondered. "Did the warden pay the light bill too? I wasn't *that* much of a saint."

Moving further into his brick-walled, loft-style apartment, he recognized a strange object sitting atop a narrow wooden stand that once housed a trophy —

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