

CHAPTER 1

THE BLUEPRINT WE NEVER HAD

Scripture: *"Though my father and mother forsake me, the Lord will receive me."*
— Psalm 27:10

Affirmation: *I am more than the titles I carry. My worth is not defined by my output, my past, or the men who failed to guide me. I have the power, the right, and the strength to define manhood for myself.*

More Than a Title

From the moment we are old enough to understand expectations, men are handed titles. *Athlete. Worker. Provider. Boyfriend. Husband. Father. Leader.* We are taught to wear these titles like armor, measuring our

entire worth by how well we perform the duties attached to them. But what happens when the armor becomes a cage?

We spend so much time figuring out how to do the job of a man that we never learn how to actually *be* one. We navigate the heavy, complex challenges of manhood while simultaneously building the mold, having never seen it modeled for us. We are expected to build a house without a blueprint.

As men, we need to know that it is not only masculine, but human and fundamentally healthy, to feel and process your own emotions. You deserve to be affirmed—not just for what you provide, not just by the people who rely on you, but by the man looking back at you in the mirror.

Call to Action: The Mirror Check

Pause right here. I want you to take a breath, look inward, and repeat this out loud:

“I am enough as a man, simply because I exist. My emotions do not make me weak; understanding them makes me whole.”

The Ghosts of Saginaw

To understand how we get trapped behind our titles, you have to understand where the blueprint went missing.

I am a husband of over fifteen years to a beautiful wife, and a father to a wonderful daughter and son. But long before I held those titles, I was a boy in Saginaw, Michigan, born to a fourteen-year-old mother and a father who was entirely out of the picture. By the time I

was two, my father had left for the military, was arrested, and never came back. My single grandmother, who we called Mama, took me in, raising me as her own alongside my uncle, Alan, who was just four years older and became my brother.

Mama was the definition of the God-fearing, hard-working, single Black mother of that era. She was always at one of two places: at home or at work. When she was home, the house always smelled of either fresh hot food or Pine-Sol. When she was at work, you'd better make sure you didn't do anything the neighbors would have to tell her about later. And when she got home, the house had better be clean, and cleaned the *right* way. One of her most memorable sayings was,

"If you do it right the first time, you don't have to do it again."

It is a phrase I catch myself repeating to this day.

No matter what was going on, she always held down one, sometimes two jobs. She modeled relentless hard work and instilled deep respect in Alan and me. When acknowledging adults, it was always *yes ma'am*, *no ma'am*, *yes sir*, and *no sir*. She kept us in church, making sure we knew about God, and she absolutely hated asking for handouts.

I remember one instance growing up where a cousin let me borrow his pair of Deion Sanders sneakers for school picture day. When Mama saw those pictures, she made sure her message was felt deep in my bones. *"Don't you ever take something from somebody that don't belong to you. If you don't got it, then you just don't got it."*

We don't need a handout." Needless to say, that principle was permanently cemented in my mind.

She also harped on the importance of education, celebrating Alan and me at every turn. At one point, she even went so far as to have custom sweat suits made for us with *"I am a 4.0 student"* pressed across the front. I was teased the first time I wore it, but the understanding was clear: excellence was the standard.

The False Models

When you don't have a positive example of manhood, the negative ones often rush in to fill the void.

In fourth grade, Mama became engaged to a man who would become my first close-up exposure to a "father figure." He was physically, emotionally, and psychologically abusive.

The night it truly escalated seemed like a normal evening. I was sitting at the kitchen table working on homework while Mama prepared dinner—fried liver, white rice, green beans, and biscuits. It was a meal that was 100% his preference and 0% ours. I heard the garage door open, and then it slammed a bit harder than normal. I happened to be looking at Mama when the door slammed, and I caught her flinch. To the eyes of a fourth-grade child, it was a normal reaction to an abrupt noise. Later in life, I would learn that this was a recoil—a conditioned response developed from repetitive physical abuse.

He walked in, set his lunch bag on the counter, and leaned over her shoulder to look at what she was making. He never said a word, and she never turned around. He walked past me toward the living room.

Though he never looked at me, I could clearly see his eyes. They were darkened, angry, mean—the kind of menacing eyes you'd see on a cartoon villain.

By the time he came back, she was placing his plate on the table. That's when he asked her if she had told us about his decision to move us to Indiana. After she responded that she hadn't, he sat there for a moment, totally rigid. His head slowly turned toward me, his nostrils flaring. It felt like smoke was puffing from his nose, filling the room with a palpable, terrifying tension.

Mama walked past him with her back turned to place the remaining plates on the old wooden table. The second she did, he grabbed her by the neck and dragged her toward the garage. I tried to stand up, but the glare he shot me froze me in my tracks. I had never seen him assault her. I had never seen *any* man physically assault a woman. My young mind couldn't process what was happening.

They were only out there for a few minutes, but it felt like an eternity. When they came back in, he sat down at the table across from me. She sat to my right. I stared down in uncertainty at my plate and softly asked her what we were eating. She told me it was liver and onions, and that it would be good if I tried it. Apparently, my reaction wasn't one he favored, because he snapped up from the table, stomped past me with his plate, and headed to their bedroom. Both Mama and I flinched as he walked by. Shortly after, she quietly told me we would be moving to a new state.

He must have realized he hadn't intended for me to see his abuse that night, because it wouldn't be completely obvious again until he had our family

isolated in Indiana. That was when the large sunglasses she wore around the house finally began to make sense.

Eventually, the desire to hide it faded. His triggers escalated over the most minuscule things, and it often felt like my mere existence was the reason she suffered. I remember making a sandwich one day and, as kids do, reaching past the thin heel of the bread loaf. He snapped at me for not eating it. Mama defended me softly. He went silent, walked into their bedroom, and closed the door. A few minutes later, he poked his head out. "*I need to talk to you for a moment.*" She reluctantly walked in. I heard the door lock, and then I heard the commotion. Moments later they emerged, him grabbing the car keys, and her wearing the sunglasses.

This was the only direct example of manhood I had under my own roof. And it taught me a dangerous, silent lesson:

The only acceptable, visible emotion for a man is anger.

Stepping Up Blind

Alan was such a great example of an older brother. Like most younger siblings, I wanted to do everything he did. I chose my sports because he played them; I wanted the clothes he wore. It wasn't until he eventually left the house—and my biological younger siblings (two brothers, one sister, and a younger cousin who was like a sister) moved in with us—that I realized I was now the oldest male in the house. I was fourteen, and I was the example they would pattern themselves after.

Being the oldest in a house full of younger siblings meant breaking up fights was commonplace. One

brother would pick on another, they would lash out, and I would have to step in while Mama was at work. Trying to be the best brother, navigating my own developing teenage testosterone, all without having an understanding of any emotion other than anger, was quite the challenge. To call it what it truly was: it was utterly exhausting.

I remember one particular instance of breaking up a fight between my younger brothers. I was so overwhelmed and frustrated that as I walked down the stairs, I punched straight through the wall. It left a hole in the drywall, earned me an obvious chewing out from Mama when she got home, and left a permanent physical scar on my hand that I still bear to this day.

I was constantly answering a call to leadership without the awareness of what it truly required. I just worked hard and pushed down everything else.

But a foundation built only on hard work and suppressed emotion cannot bear the weight of a lifetime.

End of Chapter Call to Action: Reclaiming Your Foundation

We cannot change the examples we were denied, but we have total control over the examples we become.

Your Action Step:

Write down three titles you currently hold (e.g., Worker, Father, Brother, Friend). Next to each, write down one emotional need you have neglected while trying to fulfill that role perfectly.

Affirm to yourself: *“I release the pressure of having to*

SHOULDERING THE LOAD

figure it out flawlessly. I give myself permission to learn, to feel, and to grow.”