

Concrete Rose



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ANGIE THOMAS

Angela “Angie” Thomas was born and raised in Jackson, Mississippi. She was inspired to write when she was six years old: after witnessing a shootout, her mother took Thomas to the library to introduce her to the world beyond what she witnessed. She went on to receive a BFA in creative writing from Belhaven University, the first Black student to graduate from the program. Thomas's work is greatly influenced by the deaths of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, and Eric Garner, and the Black Lives Matter movement as a whole. And she was influenced to write *Concrete Rose* after seeing the Black Lives Matter movement reignite in the wake of the May 2020 death of George Floyd. Initially, these influences led to Thomas's first book *The Hate U Give*, which was an immediate bestseller when it was released in 2017. To write it, Thomas received a grant from the organization We Need Diverse Books in 2015. *The Hate U Give* has won a number of prizes and awards, including the Coretta Scott King Award and the William C. Morris Award.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Though fictional, Maverick's world in Garden Heights exists within the real-life context of the late 1990s. Maverick mentions the recent assassination of the famous rapper Tupac in 1996. Maverick also constantly refers to Carlos as Carlton, a reference to the highly popular sitcom *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, which aired its last episode in 1996, not long before *Concrete Rose* begins. Characters also reference Bill Clinton's presidency—and though Ma thinks that President Clinton is the closest the U.S. will ever get to a Black president, readers know that Barack Obama will become president just a little more than a decade after the novel ends. The most important historical events mentioned in the novel, though, are the crack-cocaine epidemic and the war on drugs. The crack-cocaine epidemic began in earnest in the mid-1980s and in response, President Ronald Reagan encouraged a nationwide effort to respond harshly to this new form of cocaine, which was most common in inner-city Black communities. In her nonfiction work *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, lawyer Michelle Alexander argues that the war on drugs led to harsh social consequences for people convicted of use or possession, and ultimately resulted in harsher and more violent policing of Black communities. Maverick's story, then, shows the early stages of the tense and dangerous relationship between Garden Heights' Black residents and the local police force that forms the central conflict in *The Hate U*

Give, which takes place when Maverick and Lisa's daughter, Starr, is 16.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Like Angie Thomas's other two books, *The Hate U Give* and *On the Come Up*, *Concrete Rose* takes place in the fictional world of Garden Heights—though it tells the story of Maverick, the father of *The Hate U Give*'s protagonist, Starr. All three novels tackle issues of gang violence and racism, though from very different perspectives (*On the Come Up*, for instance, follows characters who are involved with Maverick's rival gang). In its dealings with gang violence and the rules guiding gang loyalty, *Concrete Rose* shares a number of similarities with Jason Reynolds's verse novel *Long Way Down* and Nic Stone's *Dear Martin* and *Dear Justyce*—and in *Concrete Rose* there's even a Nic Stone Easter egg, as the young pregnant woman who takes Maverick and Lisa on their college tour is pregnant with Justyce, *Dear Martin*'s protagonist. Within *Concrete Rose* itself, Maverick enjoys the Shakespeare play *Romeo and Juliet* and insists it's the original gang violence story. It has also been a popular work for contemporary authors to adapt for a teen audience. YA adaptations of *Romeo and Juliet* include Sharon Draper's *Romiette and Julio*, Jacqueline Woodson's *If You Come Softly*, and *These Violent Delights* by Chloe Gong.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Concrete Rose
- **When Written:** 2020
- **Where Written:** Jackson, Mississippi
- **When Published:** 2021
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Bildungsroman, Issue Novel
- **Setting:** Garden Heights
- **Climax:** Maverick decides not to kill Red to avenge Dre's murder.
- **Antagonist:** The Garden Disciples and Ant, as well as Red and P-Nut
- **Point of View:** First Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Inspiration. Angie Thomas was inspired to write *Concrete Rose* after Maverick attracted so much attention as a character, both from fans of the book *The Hate U Give* and fans of the film adaptation (which features actor Russell Hornsby as Maverick).

Pen Names. Thomas didn't choose a pen name to obscure her

real identity or influence how her books were received (as J.K. Rowling did; her publishers believed that the Harry Potter series would sell better if it weren't immediately obvious she was female). Instead, Thomas chose to publish her books under her nickname "Angie" because she didn't want to be confused with author Angela Thomas, whose work differs wildly from Angie Thomas's.



PLOT SUMMARY

Maverick has been a member of the King Lords gang since he was 12; in addition to selling cannabis for the gang, he and his best friend King sell hard drugs on the side. He also has a beautiful girlfriend named Lisa. But Maverick's life turns upside-down when, a few weeks before he starts 12th grade, a DNA test reveals that he fathered a baby with King's girlfriend, Iesha when he and Lisa were briefly broken up. The baby is even named King Jr. after King, who was previously believed to be the father. After getting the results at the local clinic, Iesha abandons the baby with Maverick and his Ma.

Maverick and Ma take King Jr. home, expecting to have him for the weekend. It's the messiest, most exhausting weekend of Maverick's life. His older cousin Dre, one of the leaders of the King Lords, already has a three-year-old daughter. He stops by several times to help Maverick with King Jr. (whom Maverick has begun to call "Li'l Man") and to tell Maverick to stop selling hard drugs behind the gang's back. Dre insists that Maverick is a father now, so he needs to step up and be the father his son deserves. To help him in this endeavor, Dre pressures Maverick into accepting a job working for Mr. Wyatt, the local grocer. Maverick tells Lisa about his son and she breaks up with him. He also tells King he's done selling drugs, which confuses and angers King.

The next few weeks are incredibly difficult for Maverick. He has no idea when Iesha plans to return for her son, whom Maverick renames Seven. On the first day of school, a kid from the rival Garden Disciples gang, Ant, tells Maverick that Dre should watch his back. Maverick skips school that afternoon to hang out with King. The two find Red (a hustler who sold Maverick a pair of fake sneakers) and destroy his merchandise. Later that afternoon, Maverick shows up late to his first day of work. Mr. Wyatt tells Maverick he only has three chances before he gets fired and instructs Maverick in how to plant **roses** in the Wyatts' garden. Maverick doesn't think the roses will grow, but he figures they deserve a chance.

One night, Dre comes over to hang out with Maverick. When Maverick runs into the house to check on Seven, someone shoots and kills Dre. All of the King Lords come to the funeral—and Lisa comes too. Afterward, Lisa and Maverick go to her house and decide to have sex, even though they don't have a condom. This makes Maverick feel better about Dre's death, but only momentarily. He tries to forget his sorrows by

smoking cannabis with Shawn, the King Lords' "crown" (leader), but Mr. Wyatt scolds Maverick for coming to work high and encourages him to cry instead of turning to drugs. Maverick also feels awful because he believes Ant killed Dre—but though Maverick believes he should kill Ant, Shawn won't let Maverick do that. Not long after, someone shoots and kills Ant.

A few weeks later, Lisa comes to Maverick's house, crying. She suspects she's pregnant. Maverick doesn't have the money to buy a pregnancy test, so he goes to Mr. Wyatt's store where he can get a test on credit. The test confirms that she's pregnant, but Ma barely reacts when Maverick tells her the news. She says it's time to go visit Pops in prison. The day before Thanksgiving, Ma, Maverick, and Seven drive to Evergreen Prison. Pops is thrilled to see them and meet his grandson, but he's furious when he learns that Maverick is expecting a second baby. He accuses both Ma and Maverick of making terrible decisions, which makes Maverick walk out. In his mind, Pops has no right to criticize him when he's in prison.

Meanwhile, Lisa's mom, Ms. Montgomery, kicks Lisa out when she learns that her daughter is pregnant, so Lisa moves in with her best friend, Tammy. Though Maverick insists they'll figure everything out together, Lisa insists that having a baby doesn't make them a couple. Maverick is still angry about this on Thanksgiving, and he feels even worse when King shows up to the family meal with Iesha in tow. As Maverick and King eat outside, Lisa's brother, Carlos, pulls up and beats Maverick up for ruining Lisa's life. At school on Monday, Maverick learns why Shawn didn't stop in on Thanksgiving: he was arrested. According to Maverick's friends Junie and Rico, they're glad to be selling drugs with King—without Shawn, nobody cares about them.

After school, Maverick buses downtown to go with Lisa to her doctor's appointment. Ma's friend Moe is the nurse who checks Lisa in, and Maverick is shocked that the doctor is Black and doesn't talk down to them. Maverick is ashamed when he can't pay Lisa's copay for the appointment. He realizes he has only one option: start selling drugs again.

Maverick spends his afternoons walking Lisa home from school and buying her food in an attempt to win her over—she's spending too much time with a white boy named Connor. When he picks her up at her Catholic school, he sells to various students and rich white people. One afternoon, when he walks her home, they discover that Tammy's older sister Brenda, her month-old son Khalil, and Brenda's boyfriend are visiting. Brenda's boyfriend turns out to be the hustler Red—and Red is wearing Dre's watch, which was stolen the night Dre was murdered. Maverick now believes that Red killed Dre.

At work with Mr. Wyatt later, Mr. Wyatt tries to get Maverick to think about the future. Maverick thinks the exercise is silly, but he says it'd be cool to own a store. Mr. Wyatt says this will require a diploma or GED. He also notes that although Maverick doesn't think he has any choice but to follow in Pops's

footsteps, he *can* make choices that will let him take a different path. When he leaves Maverick in charge of the store, P-Nut—the new crown—stops in. When Maverick tries to tell P-Nut about Red, P-Nut is unconcerned and threatens Maverick. Maverick realizes that the gang won't look out for him anymore.

Not long after, Maverick discovers that because of his poor performance in school, he'll have to repeat the 12th grade. Deciding that a diploma or a GED won't help him, Maverick decides to focus on dealing drugs. He heads to King's apartment for more product, where he discovers that Iesha is pregnant again—this time with King's baby. With some coaxing, King convinces Maverick to tell him what's going on. King is incensed when Maverick shares his suspicions about Red and reminds Maverick that he has to kill Red.

The week before Valentine's Day, Maverick waits up for Ma to get home so he can tell her that he isn't going to graduate, but he can't do it. Ma then shares with him that she's been in a romantic relationship with her friend Moe for years. On Saturday, Maverick has a big surprise planned for Lisa: he's taking her to tour Markham, the college she'd like to attend. Though Maverick likes the campus and could even see himself attending, when King lets him know that he got Maverick a gun, Maverick decides the school isn't for killers and dropouts like him.

Over the next week, Maverick gathers evidence and confirms that Red killed Dre. Then, he goes to visit Pops in prison on his own. Maverick apologizes for his behavior last time and tells Pops about finding Dre's killer. He wants Pops's permission to kill Red—but Pops refuses to give it. He says Maverick is becoming his own man and has to make his own decisions, but he reminds Maverick that all he has to do is be there for his family.

Two days later, Maverick sneaks up on Red in the park. He puts his gun to Red's head—but can't pull the trigger. Instead, he runs to Lisa's, crawls in her window, and tells her what he did. He insists he's a coward, but Lisa tells him he's a man. Maverick knows what he has to do. When he gets home, he digs out his drug stash so he can give it back to King, though he accidentally flushes half the stash down the toilet when Ma startles him. In the morning, Maverick meets King, gives him the gun back, and tells him he's done with drugs and that Red didn't kill Dre. King doesn't believe Maverick; he points the gun at Maverick and gives him an ugly look. He says that Maverick doesn't have to pay him back for the lost drugs, but Maverick knows this won't end well.

Once Maverick is done talking to King, he enters Mr. Wyatt's garden and notices that the roses are blooming. Maverick tells Mr. Wyatt the truth about not being able to graduate, so Mr. Wyatt offers him a full-time job—as long as Maverick signs up for GED classes. When Maverick tells Ma the truth later, she's furious. And when Pops calls unexpectedly, Maverick admits to

Pops that he'd like out of the King Lords. Pops says this is a brave decision, one that many men are never able to make.

Weeks later, Lisa gloats: they're having a girl, meaning she won her and Maverick's bet about the baby's sex. Ma is thrilled to have a granddaughter, and she's feeling more relaxed because Moe is going to move in and alleviate some of the family's financial troubles. As Maverick and Lisa discuss what to name their daughter, Maverick assures Lisa that he'll be there for her and will be involved in the baby's life. As they look at the stars, Maverick says that he has a name for their daughter.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Maverick Carter – Maverick Carter, the novel's protagonist, is a 17-year-old African American boy living in inner-city Garden Heights. Maverick is in the King Lords gang, which he joined at age 12. His dad, Pops, used to be the gang's leader—and when Pops went to prison, he had so many enemies that Maverick was going to be in danger without the gang's protection. Though Maverick has close friends in the gang and wants to make money by selling drugs for the gang, he also nurses dreams of attending college and leaving Garden Heights. All of these dreams seem to disappear in an instant when Maverick learns that he accidentally fathered a son with a girl named Iesha, his best friend King's girlfriend. When Iesha abandons the baby, Maverick becomes a full-time dad to his son, whom he names Seven. Though Maverick chafes against all the responsibilities he now has as a father, he adores Seven and wants to do what's best for him. At his cousin Dre's prodding, Maverick agrees to take a job with Mr. Wyatt, which includes some work in Mr. Wyatt's grocery store and his garden. Though Maverick resents how little money he makes, he gradually comes to enjoy the job. This begins to change when someone murders Dre and when Maverick discovers that his ex-girlfriend, Lisa, is pregnant with his baby. Desperate to support his family, Maverick decides to sell drugs with King. And Maverick also feels that, as Dre's cousin, it's his responsibility to avenge Dre's death by murdering his killer. When Maverick figures out that the hustler Red killed Dre, King helps Maverick acquire a gun. But as Maverick prepares to kill Red, he finds he can't do it. Though Maverick at first sees this as a failure, Lisa helps Maverick see that this makes him a man who's willing to stick around and support his family by not going to prison. Maverick eventually decides to pursue his GED and takes a full-time position with Mr. Wyatt—and he decides that he'd also like to leave the King Lords.

Lisa Montgomery – Lisa is Maverick's girlfriend, though she breaks up with him when she discovers that Seven is Maverick's son. Like Maverick, she's 17; but unlike Maverick, she attends a private Catholic school across town. Lisa is a

basketball player and is very involved with extracurriculars at her school. Her goal is to attend college, become a pediatrician, and escape Garden Heights. When she learns about Seven, Lisa feels like Maverick lied to her. She prizes honesty and loyalty, and though she and Maverick were temporarily broken up when Maverick slept with Iesha and conceived Seven, she nevertheless sees this as a major transgression. She refuses all of Maverick's attempts to win her back and goes so far as to block his phone number. So it's confusing for Maverick when, on the day of Dre's funeral, Lisa takes Maverick back to her house to have unprotected sex—and then when she goes right back to ignoring him. Lisa returns to Maverick's life when, right before Thanksgiving, she discovers that she's pregnant with Maverick's baby. She decides she'd like to have the baby and raise it herself, and she resents Maverick briefly for assuming that she'd choose to terminate the pregnancy. She also finds herself at odds with her mother, Ms. Montgomery, when Ms. Montgomery kicks Lisa out of the house after she discovers Lisa is pregnant. Though she allows Maverick to accompany her to prenatal appointments and accepts his support, she also insists that they're never going to be romantically involved again. She finds it insulting when Maverick goes to great lengths—such as organizing a surprise tour of her first-choice college—and is willing to admit that he's doing these things in part to try to win her back. At the end of the novel, after Lisa and Maverick discover that they're having a girl, Lisa seems somewhat more open to getting romantically involved with Maverick again.

King – King is Maverick's best friend. His father was Pops' right-hand man, and so Maverick and King have grown up together. But though they have a lot in common as the sons of prominent gangsters, King has grown up very differently from Maverick. King's parents died about the same time that Pops went to prison, so he spent a decade in the foster system before aging out of it. And the year before the novel begins, King is expelled from school for beating up the racist football coach; in the present, he's not in school and therefore isn't going to graduate. When the novel begins, things between King and Maverick are tense. Though King suggested Maverick sleep with his girlfriend, Iesha, when Maverick was temporarily broken up with his girlfriend Lisa, King seems very upset when a DNA test reveals that the resulting baby is Maverick's, not his. He also feels betrayed when Maverick insists he can't deal with King anymore behind the King Lords' backs. To King, this is silly—appearing loyal to the gang is important to him, but he thinks it's more important to make money and be able to support himself. The rift between King and Maverick grows as Maverick dedicates himself to caring for Seven and working for Mr. Wyatt, though King gladly allows Maverick to start dealing with him again when money gets tight. And when Maverick learns that Red murdered Dre, King is the only one to take him seriously—and help him make a plan to kill Red. As King sees it, P-Nut (the crown, or leader, of the King Lords at the time) is

ruining the operation, and he has plans to take over the gang with Maverick's help. It's a major blow when Maverick decides again that he wants out of the dealing operation. At this point, King responds in a way that frightens Maverick—Maverick recognizes that King is no longer the best friend he can trust with anything and, instead, King might do anything to punish Maverick for this betrayal. At the end of the novel, King is expecting a baby with Iesha.

Pops – Pops is Maverick's father; he's been in prison since Maverick was eight years old. Pops is tall and looks exactly like Maverick. Before he was imprisoned, Pops was the charismatic, successful crown (i.e., leader) of the King Lords gang—though he also made a number of enemies in his line of work. Because of this, when Maverick was 12, he had to join the King Lords for his own protection. Pops only appears in the novel a few times, when Maverick goes to visit him in prison. Unlike Ma, Pops is relatively easygoing and isn't angry with Maverick at all when he learns that Maverick is Seven's father. He dispenses as much parenting advice as he can, the most important of which is to give Seven a name that will “tell him who he is” and show him the kind of person he should be (at the time, Seven is still named King Jr., a name Pops finds unacceptable). When Maverick admits that Lisa is pregnant with his baby, though, Pops is angry and accuses both Maverick and Ma of making poor choices and neglecting their duties. Following this, Maverick refuses to speak to Pops for several months. He feels like Pops doesn't have any right to tell him how to behave or to call him out on his mistakes—after all, Pops made the mistake of keeping cocaine in the house where his wife and son lived, which resulted in Pops's imprisonment. Maverick also learns from Ma that she feels Pops is holding them back and keeping them from moving on with their lives. Though Maverick desperately wants Pops's permission to kill Red and avenge Dre's death, Pops refuses to give Maverick permission. Pops insists that it has to be Maverick's choice. Though Pops seems to still be supportive of the King Lords himself, he also seems proud of Maverick when Maverick admits he'd like to look into leaving the King Lords.

Ma – Ma is Maverick's mother; they live in a small house in Garden Heights. Ma works two jobs to make ends meet, so she often doesn't get home until late at night. However, she's nevertheless supportive of Maverick and expects him to do well in school. Though she recognizes that Maverick's association with the King Lords gang is one of necessity, she nevertheless hates that he's part of a gang and even resents her husband and Maverick's father, Pops, for putting Maverick in such a situation. When Maverick discovers that Seven is his son, Ma is disappointed but throws herself into teaching Maverick how to be a parent and care for an infant. She's adamant that Maverick do as much for Seven as he can, but she also recognizes Maverick's need to be a kid, as when she sends him to a football game while she watches Seven at home. Though when

Maverick shares with Ma that Lisa is pregnant, Ma feels like she's failed Maverick as a parent. It's not so unexpected, she suggests, that Maverick fathered *one* child—but it seems like a major failure on her part that he made the same mistake twice. This is heartbreaking for Maverick, as he wants nothing more than to make Ma proud. So when Maverick learns that he's not going to graduate, he puts off telling Ma, as he knows it'll break her heart. When she's not working or spending time with Seven, Ma is most often with her friend Moe. For much of the novel, Maverick believes that Ma and Moe are just friends. But eventually, Ma reveals that she's bisexual and has been in a romantic relationship with Moe for years. She insists that while she'll always love Pops, she can't put her life on hold while he serves his life sentence; she has to be happy and do things that make her happy.

Mr. Wyatt – Mr. Wyatt is an elderly Black man who owns the local grocery store in Garden Heights along with his wife, Mrs. Wyatt. He's stern and has very specific ideas about how young men should conduct themselves; for instance, he doesn't tolerate any gang activity in his store and believes that young men don't need to associate with a gang to get ahead in the world. Maverick recognizes that Mr. Wyatt feels this way because he cares, even though he's sometimes annoying. But this becomes more difficult for Maverick to deal with when he agrees to take a job in Mr. Wyatt's grocery store. Mr. Wyatt is a strict boss: he doesn't tolerate Maverick coming in late, lying, or coming to work intoxicated. Though Maverick resents Mr. Wyatt's strictness and how minimal his paychecks seem, Mr. Wyatt becomes an important mentor to Maverick. Unlike everyone else in Maverick's life, Mr. Wyatt asks Maverick if he wants to talk about difficult subjects and asks Maverick how he feels about things. He insists that it's a lie that Black men don't have feelings and shouldn't express them, and he encourages Maverick to cry in the aftermath of Dre's murder. Most importantly, Mr. Wyatt encourages Maverick to see the value in education, legal work, and insists that it's necessary to get rid of anything in his life that isn't helping him grow. Maverick takes this advice to heart when, at the end of the novel, he decides to pursue his GED, become a business owner, and realizes he'd like to leave the King Lords.

Dre – Dre is Maverick's older cousin; he's in his early 20s. He's getting married in a year to his fiancée, Keisha, with whom he has a three-year-old daughter, Adreanna. Maverick has adored Dre his entire life and wants to be like him—that is, a high-profile and successful member of the King Lords gang. So it's perplexing for Maverick to think about how much fatherhood has changed Dre. Since becoming a father, Dre seems far less interested in participating in gang activities and selling drugs—and Maverick even suspects that Dre would leave the King Lords, if he ever got the chance to do so. Dre takes the responsibility of looking out for Maverick seriously, so he assures Ma that Maverick isn't going to have to sell drugs as

part of his duties. In reality, Dre is allowing Maverick to sell cannabis, but only to make enough money to help Ma with the bills. When Maverick gains custody of Seven, Dre is one of his most important mentors as Maverick figures out fatherhood. Dre encourages Maverick to focus on his new family, to “man up,” and to take a job with Mr. Wyatt, something that Dre insists will give Maverick “clean money.” More than anything, Dre doesn't want Maverick to have to follow in his footsteps. About a month after Maverick gets custody of Seven, someone murders Dre outside of Maverick's house. Dre's death is a huge blow for Maverick given how close they were, and Maverick believes that as Dre's cousin, it's his responsibility to murder Dre's killer. But when Maverick discovers that the culprit is a hustler named Red, he's forced to consider what Dre would actually want him to do in this situation. Ultimately, Maverick realizes that Dre would've wanted him to prioritize his family—and not kill someone, which would jeopardize Maverick's ability to be there for his family.

Iesha – Iesha is Seven's mother and King's on-again, off-again girlfriend. Like Maverick and King, she's 17. About a year before *Concrete Rose* begins, when Maverick and Lisa were temporarily broken up, King set Maverick and Iesha up to have sex to “take Maverick's mind off things”—and the condom broke. This results in Seven. Before they take the DNA test to find out who Seven's biological father is, Iesha desperately wants Seven to be King's baby and to have a family with King. She's distraught when the DNA test reveals that Maverick is the father. After this discovery, Iesha abandons Seven with Maverick, leaves her mother's house, and lives with various friends. As time goes on and as Iesha evades Maverick's attempts to talk to her, Maverick learns that Iesha has had a very rough time of motherhood. Her mother, Ms. Robinson, refused to help Iesha throughout her pregnancy and for the first three months of Seven's life. Though Iesha refuses to see a doctor, Maverick and Ma suspect that Iesha is suffering from postpartum depression. When Maverick is able to get Iesha to talk to him, she talks about how Seven doesn't deserve her when she's in “that dark place” and she admits that she felt very overwhelmed as a single parent. Eventually, Ma insists that Iesha give Maverick full legal custody of Seven and settle for seeing her son once per week. Near the end of the novel, Maverick discovers that Iesha is happily pregnant again and this baby's father is actually King.

King Jr./Li'l Man/Seven – Seven is Maverick and Iesha's infant son. When he's born, though, Iesha believes that her boyfriend, King, is the father, and so she names the baby King Jr. But when King Jr. is a few weeks old and starts to resemble Maverick, Iesha arranges for a DNA test to discover the baby's paternity. Maverick becomes a full-time single parent to the baby once the test reveals that he's the father. Unwilling to allow his son to be named after his best friend, Maverick calls the baby Li'l Man until he comes up with the name Seven. The name Seven is

a reference to one of Maverick's favorite rappers, Tupac, and the number seven is associated with perfection. Maverick believes his son is perfect and, indeed, is the most perfect version of Maverick himself. Seven is a happy baby and, over the course of the novel, grows from a three-month-old to almost a year old. He adores Maverick and Ma, his grandmother, and he also loves Lisa. Seven sleeps with his brow furrowed, which Maverick thinks is an indicator that Seven is trying to fix all the world's problems.

Red – Red is one of the novel's antagonists. He's Garden Heights' local hustler and sells various items—many of them black-market—out of the trunk of his red Impala. Maverick learns he's untrustworthy early on, when Red sells him a pair of fake Air Jordan sneakers. But later, Red becomes an even more sinister character when Maverick notices that Red is wearing Dre's watch, which was stolen on the night that Dre was murdered. Since Red acts so nervous when Maverick notices the watch, Maverick concludes that Red must've murdered Dre. However, when Maverick finds Red one night and puts a gun to his head, Maverick finds he can't go through with pulling the trigger. Red pleads with Maverick (not knowing who's holding a gun to his head) to spare him because he has a son, the infant Khalil. This seems to be a major reason why Maverick chooses not to kill Red—though Maverick also thinks that Red will, at some point, get his comeuppance.

Shawn – Shawn is the crown (i.e., the leader) of the King Lords gang. He's in his early 20s and his best friend is Dre, Maverick's older cousin. Shawn, like Dre, sees it as his responsibility to look out for and mentor Maverick and the other "li'l homies." Thus, when Dre is murdered, Shawn agrees to follow through with Dre's wishes: that Maverick not sell drugs for the gang, and that Maverick not take on the responsibility of murdering whoever murdered Dre. Ultimately, Shawn isn't able to protect Maverick because on Thanksgiving, he's arrested. What starts as a traffic stop turns into an arrest and incarceration when the police find Shawn's unregistered gun and trace it to a murder. Maverick expects Shawn to be in prison for a number of years.

Carlos Montgomery – Carlos is Lisa's older brother; he's in college and so isn't around Garden Heights much. When he is around, he and Maverick have a confrontational relationship; they constantly insult each other and fight for Lisa's approval. Maverick snidely calls Carlos Carlton, a reference to the preppy and conservative character from the sitcom *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*. Though Lisa finds Carlos annoying, she trusts him to be there for her. So when she discovers she's pregnant with Maverick's baby, she decides to wait until he's home for the Thanksgiving holiday to tell Ms. Montgomery, believing that he'll help calm their mother down. Instead, Carlos says nothing while Ms. Montgomery says horrible things and kicks Lisa out of the house. However, after this betrayal, Carlos accompanies Lisa to the doctor for her first prenatal appointment and pays her copay. Immediately after he learns

that Lisa is pregnant, he beats up Maverick, and later, his snide remarks about Maverick not being able to afford two children push Maverick to return to dealing drugs.

Moe – Moe is a nurse and one of Ma's friends. At first, Maverick believes that Moe is just one of Ma's closest friends. The two women met a few years after Pops went to prison and they spend a lot of time together. But over the course of the novel, Maverick starts to notice people like Pops and Lisa talking strangely about Moe and Ma's relationship—and eventually, Ma reveals that she and Moe have been romantically involved for years. At the end of the novel, Moe is preparing to move in with Ma and Maverick, which will help ease the family's financial struggles.

Keisha – Keisha is Dre's fiancé and Adreanna's mother. She and Dre have been together for years, but they plan to get married the summer after the novel begins. Keisha is a college student at Markham and while she's in school, she and Adreanna live near campus while Dre lives in Garden Heights. She's distraught when Dre is murdered, but she's able to give Maverick an important clue as he tries to figure out who killed Dre: Dre's killer had a raspy voice, like Red.

Adreanna – Adreanna is Dre's three-year-old daughter with Keisha and until Dre dies, she's the light of his life. She's a happy, funny child whose presence inspires Dre to try hard to be the best father he can be. She adores Seven and insists on seeing him every time she spends time around Maverick.

P-Nut – P-Nut is a "big homie" in the King Lords. Few people like him. He's fond of making up words and thinks this habit makes him sound smart, but in private, "li'l homies" like Maverick and King make fun of P-Nut for this. After Dre is murdered and Shawn ends up in prison, P-Nut makes himself the crown of the gang. Though he makes a show of respecting Dre's desire to not make Maverick deal drugs, he also implies that if Maverick makes a fuss for any reason he'll be forced to deal again. Most offensive to Maverick is the fact that P-Nut doesn't seem to care when clues point to Red having killed Dre. King plans to oust P-Nut and become the crown sometime after the novel ends.

Ms. Robinson – Ms. Robinson is Iesha's mother. She's a caustic, rude woman who believes that Iesha has to take responsibility for the mistakes she made, so she refuses to help her daughter at all when King Jr. is born. She encourages Iesha to abandon King Jr. with Maverick when they find out that Maverick is the father. Ma detests Ms. Robinson, especially since Ms. Robinson receives welfare benefits that are supposed to support King Jr.—and she makes no effort to transfer those benefits to Maverick after Maverick takes custody of his son.

Mrs. Wyatt – Mrs. Wyatt is Mr. Wyatt's wife and Maverick's neighbor. She helps her husband out in his grocery store and, once Maverick takes a job with Mr. Wyatt, begins watching Seven for Maverick while he's at school and working. She's a

kind, generous woman who adores babies and children—she and Mr. Wyatt used to foster kids and even fostered King until he aged out of the system.

Ant – Ant is a member of the Garden Disciples, the King Lords' rival gang. He's a high school student who goes to Maverick's school and is very short. Because of the way that Ant tells Maverick that Dre should watch his back on the first day of school, Maverick and the other King Lords believe that Ant murdered Dre. When someone then murders Ant in the parking lot at a football game, Shawn decides to drop the issue. However, Maverick eventually realizes that Ant didn't kill Dre.

Ms. Montgomery – Ms. Montgomery is Lisa and Carlos's mother. She's a strict, rude woman and has disliked Maverick from the moment that Lisa and Maverick started to see each other. Though Lisa believes that Ms. Montgomery was right to hate Maverick when she learns that Seven is Maverick's son, Lisa also discovers that her mother is judgmental and vindictive with everyone. When she discovers that Lisa is pregnant, Ms. Montgomery kicks Lisa out—though Lisa is surprised to find her mother didn't kick her off of the family's health insurance.

Jamal – Jamal is Mr. Wyatt's nephew. He's attending community college and works in Mr. Wyatt's store part time. Maverick never does anything but nod to Jamal and doesn't seem to know him well, but he thinks that Jamal is a nerd and that it's not worth aspiring to be like him. To Mr. Wyatt, though, Jamal is an example of what's possible for young Black men in Garden Heights: if they're not affiliated with a gang, they can receive an education and ultimately get out of Garden Heights.

Granny – Granny is Maverick's grandmother. She lives about 30 minutes outside of Garden Heights and adores Maverick, so Maverick knows that if he needs any help with Seven, Granny will be there as soon as she can. Though Granny thinks it's normal and not worth getting upset about teenagers having babies, she takes major offense when she learns that Maverick is expecting a second baby with Lisa. She embarrasses him at Thanksgiving by taking 15 minutes while she says grace to ask God to take away Maverick's "mannishness" and to help him stop having babies.

Mr. Clayton – Mr. Clayton is the counselor at Maverick's high school. He's an imposing Black man, but he seems to genuinely care about his students. Mr. Clayton defies Maverick's expectations by not talking down to him about having two kids—though he does annoy Maverick by insisting that he needs to get his diploma or GED in order to best support his kids.

Cousin Gary Cousin Gary is one of Maverick's extended family members. He's a lawyer who lives in the suburbs and is married to a white woman. Maverick detests him because he knows Cousin Gary looks down on the family members who still live in the city. Cousin Gary never appears in person in the novel.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Deja McAllister – Deja McAllister gives Maverick and Lisa a tour of Markham, the college where Lisa wants to go. She's pregnant and due a month before Lisa—and she and her husband plan to name their son Justyce.

Mr. Reuben – Mr. Reuben owns a barbecue place in downtown Garden Heights and is one of Mr. Wyatt's friends.

Mr. Lewis – Mr. Lewis is the cranky and rude barber in Garden Heights. He, Mr. Reuben, and Mr. Wyatt spend much of their time at work chatting. When the conversations take place at Mr. Wyatt's grocery store, Mr. Lewis makes a point to insult Maverick.

Dr. Byrd – Dr. Byrd is the OB-GYN that Lisa sees throughout her pregnancy. She's a heavysset Black woman and surprises Maverick by not seeming at all concerned or judgmental that Lisa is 17 and that Maverick already has another child.

Junie – Junie is one of Maverick's best friends and a "li'l homie" in the King Lords. He and Rico start selling harder drugs behind Shawn and P-Nut's back after Dre dies.

Rico – Rico is one of Maverick's best friends and a "li'l homie" in the King Lords. He and Junie start selling harder drugs behind Shawn and P-Nut's back after Dre dies.

Tammy – Tammy is Lisa's best friend and Ms. Rosalie's daughter. Lisa goes to live with Tammy once Ms. Montgomery kicks her out.

Brenda – Brenda is Tammy's older sister. She and her boyfriend, Red, have a month-old baby named Khalil.

Khalil – Khalil is Brenda and Red's baby; he's about a month old when Maverick meets him.

Ms. Rosalie – Ms. Rosalie is Tammy's mother. She offers Lisa her older daughter, Brenda's, room when Ms. Montgomery kicks Lisa out.

Mrs. Turner – Mrs. Turner is the world history teacher at Maverick's high school.

Lala – Lala is Ilesha's best friend. Because Lala refuses to give Maverick a straight answer as to where Ilesha is, Maverick suspects she knows where Ilesha is staying and is trying to protect her friend's privacy.

Bus Stop Tony – Tony is a local crack-cocaine addict in Garden Heights. He's around the night that Dre is murdered and with his information, Maverick is able to confirm that Red killed Dre.

Connor – Connor is a white boy who goes to school with Lisa. Maverick resents him and sees him as his competition, though Lisa consistently says that she and Connor aren't romantically involved.

Mr. Phillips Maverick's history teacher.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



MASCULINITY AND FATHERHOOD

Concrete Rose follows 17-year-old Maverick Carter, a gangster who loves his friends and sees his affiliation with the King Lords gang as a necessity.

But Maverick's life repeatedly turns upside down: first, a DNA test reveals that Maverick's one-night stand with a girl named Iesha resulted in a son. Soon after, Maverick's beloved older cousin, Dre, is shot and killed. And finally, Maverick discovers that his ex-girlfriend Lisa is pregnant with his baby. As Maverick becomes a full-time parent to his and Iesha's son, Seven, he vows to take Dre's advice to heart and "man up." However, it's never entirely clear—either to Maverick or to the reader—exactly what it means to "man up." This is further complicated by the fact that everyone in Maverick's life gives him different advice about how to be a man and how best to support his family. But as Maverick matures and learns how to care for Seven, it becomes clear that being a father has a profound effect on how he comes to think of masculinity. *Concrete Rose* suggests that manhood shouldn't be defined by stoicism and violence, as many men in the King Lords believe is the case. Rather, being a man means being willing to sacrifice one's own desires, to be emotional, and to care for one's family and friends.

Initially, Maverick associates masculinity with stoicism and a lack of emotion. Maverick's belief in stoicism becomes clear after he becomes a full-time dad to three-month-old Seven. Maverick has no experience taking care of a baby, but only two days after bringing Seven home, Ma goes to work and leaves Maverick home alone with his son. Though Ma reminds Maverick that he has people to call for help if he needs it, Maverick responds with "what a man should" say: that he won't need help and can handle it on his own. Later, in the weeks after Dre is shot and killed, Maverick expresses the same sentiment. As he prepares for the funeral, he reminds himself that he can't cry—he has to be strong for Ma, for his Aunt 'Nita (Dre's mother), and for the rest of the female family members. Even talking about his feelings, Maverick believes, will take away from his ability to care for his family. The only way Maverick believes he should deal with his emotions is by actively choosing to not acknowledge them, and instead to throw himself into supporting his other family members.

But as time goes on, it becomes increasingly difficult for Maverick to ignore his emotions. From the moment he picks up

baby Seven, Maverick feels an almost frightening feeling of love and responsibility for his son. This feeling ebbs and flows as Seven grows, but it's impossible for Maverick to ignore that having Seven in his life is making him a more emotional, passionate person. But while it's possible to see Seven as opening Maverick up and making him more comfortable with his emotions, Dre's death has a profoundly negative effect on Maverick. When it comes to his grief, Maverick knows that there's only one appropriate way to deal with it: to follow the unwritten "rules" of the street and kill Dre's killer, thereby avenging Dre's death. Importantly, Maverick interprets this unwritten rule as meaning that this is the only proper, effective way to deal with his grief—which in turn shuts Maverick off processing his grief in more productive ways.

Eventually, Maverick comes to realize that being a good man and father means caring for his family—and that this sometimes means expressing uncomfortable emotions rather than repressing them. In the months after Dre's death, Maverick comes to realize that Dre had begun to realize the value of prioritizing family and emotion above all else. In life, Dre spoke often about the depth of his love for his daughter Adreanna, and how profound it was to hold her for the first time. Her birth, he implies, made him want to change and become a different kind of man, one who's emotionally and physically present for his family—suggesting that expressing emotion isn't such a bad thing. At the time, Maverick had scoffed but now that he's a father himself, Dre's advice starts to make more sense. After Dre's death, Mr. Wyatt steps into the role of Maverick's mentor. One afternoon when Maverick can't control his tears and cries about Dre's death, Mr. Wyatt sadly says that "one of the biggest lies ever told is that Black men don't feel emotions." He encourages Maverick to express any emotions he feels in healthy ways, such as through crying and talking with others about his grief and his fears. Through this, Mr. Wyatt is able to flesh out some of the ideas that Dre was only barely able to introduce to Maverick: that being a good man and a father means not being afraid of his emotions and instead, accepting that they exist and not letting them dictate his actions.

Though Maverick eventually identifies Dre's killer as the hustler Red and even goes so far as to put a gun to Red's head, Maverick ultimately chooses to let Red live. He does this for several reasons, including that Red also has an infant son, and that Maverick fears that he'd ultimately go to prison or be killed in retaliation for killing Red. But although Maverick initially sees his failure to kill Red as failure to be a man (since he couldn't carry out the "rules"), Lisa impresses on Maverick that choosing to let Red live was actually the mature, compassionate thing to do. It means, most importantly, that Maverick will be able to go on being a present father figure to Seven and will be around to parent his and Lisa's daughter when she's born—and that he'll be able to continue to follow Dre and Mr. Wyatt's

advice to feel his emotions rather than run from them.



IDENTITY AND INDIVIDUALITY

Though Maverick is only 17 years old, he's already been a member of the King Lords gang for five years. He had to join at age 12 for protection, since his father, Pops (a former member of the same gang), made so many enemies before he was imprisoned for life. Because of his father's reputation, Maverick is known around the city of Garden Heights as Li'l Don, a reference to Pops's first name. To others in the gang, it's impossible to see Maverick as his own person separate from his father. But as Maverick struggles to balance his gang affiliation with suddenly becoming a parent, he begins to question what he really wants out of his life—and what kind of a person he wants to be. Through Maverick's struggle, *Concrete Rose* proposes that even in cases where a person feels immense pressure to act a certain way, people always have a choice in who they want to be and how they want their lives to look.

When readers first meet Maverick, his identity isn't entirely his own and he feels like he has few choices in who he becomes. The novel opens with Maverick and his best friend, King, playing a pickup basketball game against Maverick's cousin Dre and the King Lords' "crown" (leader), Shawn. As people cheer in support of Maverick and King from the sidelines, they cheer not for Maverick and King, but for "Li'l Don and Li'l Zeke." Don, or Adonis, is Maverick's father and the King Lords' former crown, and he's in prison; Zeke is King's deceased father. As Maverick explains this to the reader he notes, "Guess we not old enough to go by our own names yet." With this, Maverick shows that he's growing up in his father's shadow—nobody sees him as his own person yet. For Maverick, this isn't necessarily a bad thing—it's just the way things are. As he understands it, his future and his identity are already laid out for him: he's going to progress through the ranks of the gang and follow in Pops' footsteps. Similarly, the way that Maverick talks about becoming a father suggests that he doesn't see himself as having choices. He insists to people like Ma and his employer, the grocer Mr. Wyatt, that conceiving Seven and Lisa's baby were "accidents" and "just happened"—thereby absolving himself of any responsibility. In other words, Maverick thinks of fatherhood as something that happened *to* him, not something that he chose to risk by having unprotected sex.

Though Maverick sees his identity as something set, Mr. Wyatt proposes that people always have choices when it comes to who they are and what they value. For instance, when Maverick tells Mr. Wyatt that he had no choice but to join the King Lords and follow in his father's footsteps, Mr. Wyatt acknowledges that "the apple doesn't fall far from the tree." But he adds to this saying by insisting that "[the apple] can roll away from the tree. It simply need a little push." With this, Mr. Wyatt suggests that nothing is set in stone. Maverick might not be able to choose

the "tree" he fell from, but he can make choices to move away from the circumstances he was born into rather than resign himself to them. It is, however, worth noting that Maverick only insists he doesn't have a choice *sometimes*—on some level, he does recognize that he has choices. For instance, the one thing Maverick chooses to do of his own volition is sell hard drugs with King behind the "big homies" backs. With this, Maverick shows that he recognizes he can make decisions for himself—but those decisions may have negative consequences, such as being beaten by the "big homies" for this transgression.

Eventually, Maverick realizes that he does have choices in who he is and who he becomes—but those choices aren't easy. Arguably the most difficult choice Maverick makes over the course of the novel is to not murder Red, the man he believes murdered Dre. Maverick explains at several points that there are "rules" guiding life on the streets, and one of the most important rules is that if someone kills a family member, it's imperative to then kill the family member's killer. At first, Maverick accepts this rule at face value: killing Red is something he has to do to avenge Dre and make himself a man. But when Maverick is moments away from pulling the trigger, he finds that he does actually have a choice. And ultimately, he chooses not to kill Red. With this, Maverick chooses to become a more compassionate, understanding person, and he chooses to value being there for his family more than getting revenge for family members who are already dead (he recognizes that if he kills Red, he could easily end up in prison or shot by someone else following the rules).

Though *Concrete Rose*'s exploration of identity doesn't tie up neatly—Maverick is still caught between the King Lords and a different future in which he doesn't have to sell drugs to make ends meet—the novel nevertheless suggests that a person's identity can shift multiple times throughout their life. Indeed, the novel implies that in order for a person to grow, it's necessary that they learn the importance of making their own decisions and trying to become the person they want to be. To this end, Maverick is eventually willing to voice to Lisa and to Pops that he'd eventually like to get out of the gang—a dangerous prospect, but one that Maverick knows will give him the life he wants. Anyone, the novel suggests, can make choices about who and what they want to be—they must just be willing to accept the consequences of those choices.



LOYALTY, GANG AFFILIATION, AND FAMILY

Maverick is an extremely loyal person. Though he takes issue with his gang affiliation for several reasons over the course of the novel, he maintains that being a part of the King Lords means that he'll always have "brothers" who are loyal to him and whom he needs to be loyal to in return. Similarly, Maverick cares deeply for his parents, Ma and Pops and his older cousin Dre. And when he suddenly becomes

a full-time parent to his infant son Seven, he instantly realizes that his son needs his loyalty and support too. Though *Concrete Rose* shows that loyalty among friends and family members can motivate people to take steps toward creating a more secure life, loyalty within the context of gang affiliation can create a dangerous sense of obligation and keep people from being as loyal to their families as they could be otherwise.

For Maverick, the loyalty he receives from the King Lords is positive and necessary because it protects him from danger and helps him make a living. He explains at one point that he had to join the King Lords at age 12 because Pops made so many enemies on the streets before he was imprisoned nine years before the novel begins. In order for Maverick to expect to survive leaving the house, it was necessary for him to join the gang. This is because in general, loyalty guides how the gang members interact with each other. Since Pops was the former “crown” (leader) of the gang, there’s no question that the older gang members are going to protect and care for Maverick. But Maverick is only one person in a group that, on the whole, is immensely loyal and looks out for its own. There are unspoken rules guiding how different people in the gang show loyalty to each other, as when the “big homies” and the “li’l homies” (adult and high-school-aged gang members, respectively) look out for the “youngins” (middle-school-aged gang members). And in exchange for this care, the li’l homies and the youngins are supposed to show the big homies their loyalty by doing whatever they’re asked to do. Finally, the gang also gives its members a guaranteed way to make money through dealing drugs. Having this steady source of income means that the big homies (who exclusively deal the more expensive hard drugs) can take care of their families and the families of li’l homies (who deal less expensive cannabis) and the youngins. Through the gang, a young person can find protection, financial help, and mentorship in exchange for their loyalty.

However, when Maverick suddenly becomes a full-time single parent to his three-month-old son Seven, he begins to see that family will be there to support him where, perhaps, the gang won’t be. When Maverick takes custody of Seven, his social life disappears—few of his friends, he realizes, want to hang out with him when all they can do is sit at home and watch him take care of Seven. But where Maverick’s friends in the gang disappear, Maverick’s Ma and Dre step in to fill the gaps. Maverick relies heavily on Ma’s support—she surprises him with her willingness to coach him on everything from how to change a diaper to how to properly feed Seven a bottle. And though she says Maverick needs to figure things out for himself and be able to support his son, she also makes it clear through her actions and her words that she will always be there to support Maverick and Seven financially. Dre, too, shows Maverick immense loyalty and support as he dispenses parenting and life advice. He counsels Maverick to rethink his affiliation with the gang as, in his experience, being part of the

King Lords means that it’s impossible to truly dedicate himself to fatherhood. With this, Dre plants an important idea in Maverick’s head: that gang affiliation may offer protection and a way to make money, but that it’s more important to be a good parent than it is to be a good gang member.

As the novel progresses, Maverick is forced to choose between gang loyalty and his family—and the book frames his loyalty to the gang as increasingly misguided. After Dre is murdered and Shawn (the current crown) is imprisoned, a man named P-Nut takes over as the crown. P-Nut is a big homie, but Maverick soon realizes that P-Nut doesn’t really care about him or any of the other li’l homies or youngins. For instance, P-Nut doesn’t seem to care at all when Maverick discovers that a man named Red killed Dre, and he reminds Maverick that he can go against Shawn and Dre’s wishes and force Maverick to sell drugs again at any point. This impresses upon Maverick that he can’t trust the gang to look out for him or his family—at least not when P-Nut is in charge. Discovering that Red killed Dre presents its own problems, as this discovery means that Maverick’s loyalty is pulled in multiple directions. Maverick knows that according to the “rules” that guide life on the streets, he’s required to kill Red to avenge Dre’s death. This is how, in his understanding, he shows Dre his loyalty. But Maverick also realizes that by shooting Red, he’s also putting himself at risk of being imprisoned or killed himself, which would then put him in a position where he couldn’t take care of his family.

Ultimately, Maverick chooses not to kill Red and starts to consider leaving the King Lords. Through these choices, Maverick shows that he’s come to prioritize loyalty to his family over loyalty to the gang. Gang loyalty may provide protection and a sense of camaraderie, but their support is conditional on his continued loyalty and deference—unlike the loyalty he receives from his family members.



POVERTY

The novel’s 17-year-old protagonist, Maverick, isn’t sure what he wants to do with his life, but he knows one thing: he has to make money. He and his family are struggling to make ends meet—and though Maverick nurses secret dreams of going to college and owning a business, he knows that in reality, that’s not an option for him. In order to support his family, he needs to stay in his home city of Garden Heights and deal drugs, as he knows he isn’t going to graduate high school and doesn’t have any other opportunities on the horizon. In Maverick’s impoverished neighborhood, drug-dealing and gang affiliation seem like the only ways to make ends meet, even as these things put people at risk of imprisonment or death. And when a person goes to prison or is killed, it plunges their family even deeper into poverty. Thus, through Maverick and his loved ones’ struggles with money, *Concrete Rose* illustrates how growing up in poverty creates a cycle that is difficult to escape—though it also suggests that to

some extent, it is possible to break the cycle and overcome poverty.

The economic opportunities the King Lords gang offers are some of the most important reasons Maverick sees for valuing his gang affiliation. He explains that although his older cousin Dre (the second in command of the gang) doesn't really want him dealing drugs, Dre ultimately gave in and allowed Maverick to start selling cannabis some time before the events of the novel. He allowed Maverick to sell because both he and Maverick understand that the money earned from selling drugs is a necessity: it gives Maverick the extra cash he needs to help Ma with the bills, and it also allows him to maintain his wardrobe of designer shoes and clothes. Dre and Shawn, as "big homies" in charge of the gang, also show Maverick what's possible financially if he sticks with the gang and works his way up the ranks. They both drive luxury cars with expensive sound systems, and Dre is able to provide for his fiancé, Keisha, and his three-year-old daughter Adreanna with the money he makes selling drugs. They make selling drugs seem not just profitable, but the only way to get by in Garden Heights.

In contrast, Maverick discovers that making "clean money" (that is, money not from drugs or other illicit activities) barely gives families enough to scrape by. Ma, for instance, has to work two jobs just to keep up with rent and the utility bills—and though things are tight to begin with, the family's financial situation gets even worse when Maverick takes custody of Seven. With the added expenses of diapers, formula, and baby furniture, Ma's two jobs don't give her and Maverick nearly enough to scrape by. Even when Maverick takes a part-time job with Mr. Wyatt, the local grocer, he's dismayed by how little money he earns—his first paycheck gives him just enough for diapers and the light bill. This, for Maverick, feels like he's in an impossible situation. Before Dre died, he desperately wanted Maverick to make "clean money" so he could be a better father to Seven—but that "clean money," Maverick finds, isn't enough to actually support his family. Dealing drugs seems like his only option to do more than just survive, given these circumstances.

Concrete Rose suggests that a major reason for this state of affairs is shame and a universal desire for dignity. It's extremely shameful for Maverick when he goes to a football game with his friends and only has \$10 from Ma to buy his ticket and a snack. It's even worse when he doesn't have the money to buy his girlfriend Lisa a pregnancy test or pay for her copay at her first prenatal appointment after she confirms her pregnancy. Financial security, the novel shows, allows people to move through the world with dignity, and without having to fear embarrassment when they can't come up with the money for a necessary expense. But the novel suggests that dignity can come from many sources—including being able to make "clean money." Though Maverick initially sees his job with Mr. Wyatt as shameful and embarrassing, he eventually realizes that the job can help him accomplish his dream at the end of the novel:

becoming an entrepreneur and a small business owner, and ultimately leaving the King Lords. Achieving this goal, he realizes, will mean throwing himself into getting his GED, taking his education seriously, and continuing to work for Mr. Wyatt for far less money than he'd make selling drugs.

However, *Concrete Rose* also makes it clear that Maverick's desire to leave the gang, stop selling drugs, and make money legally is perhaps the exception rather than the norm. Indeed, there's no indication that Maverick's friends Junie and Rico intend to do anything but move up in the King Lords after they graduate high school. And Maverick's best friend King—who, like Maverick, has a baby on the way—insists that he has to continue dealing to support his new family. But through King's reasoning in particular, the novel encourages readers to recognize that Maverick, King, and other gangsters in Garden Heights have very similar goals. They're all trying to do what's best for their families—and given the economic situation in Garden Heights, it's not always possible to do that through legal means.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



ROSES

The roses that Maverick helps Mr. Wyatt plant in his garden symbolize Maverick himself. When Maverick helps Mr. Wyatt plant the roses on his first day of work in the fall, he's dismayed to see that what Mr. Wyatt refers to as "rosebushes" actually just look like twigs. They don't look at all like Maverick thinks roses should look, and they definitely don't seem like they're ever going to be luscious bushes with huge, bright flowers. This mirrors how Maverick sees himself for a majority of the novel. Though people like Mr. Wyatt, Lisa, and Ma constantly insist that Maverick can be something great and grow up to do amazing things with his life—just like the roses—Maverick finds it difficult to believe them when it doesn't seem like it'll ever be possible to do anything but deal drugs. Maverick sees himself as unpromising and without potential, just like how he sees the bareroot rosebushes.

But even though Maverick doesn't believe that the roses are going to thrive, he nevertheless takes Mr. Wyatt's instruction on how to care for them to heart. Mr. Wyatt tells Maverick that it's important to prune roses and cut away everything that isn't going to help them grow—and it's important, he says, for people to do the same thing. Over the course of the novel, Maverick puts this advice into practice by pruning his own life. He eventually cuts dealing and his former best friend, King, out of his life, and he decides that someday, he'd also like to leave the

King Lords gang.

It's significant that immediately after telling King he doesn't want to sell drugs anymore, Maverick enters Mr. Wyatt's garden to find the roses in full bloom, even though it's the middle of winter. Maverick realizes Mr. Wyatt was right: roses can handle more than most people think and can overcome even the most difficult of circumstances to become beautiful. Seeing this, Maverick decides that it's time to give himself a chance to bloom, just like he gave the roses. In this way, the roses show Maverick that he should believe in his own resilience and potential for success.



QUOTES



Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Balzer + Bray edition of *Concrete Rose* published in 2021.

Chapter 1 Quotes

☝☝ One of them yell out, "Don't let them punk you, Li'l Don and Li'l Zeke!"

It don't matter that my pops been locked up for nine years or that King's pops been dead almost as long. They still Big Don, the former crown, and Big Zeke, his right-had man. That make me Li'l Don and King Li'l Zeke. Guess we not old enough to go by our own names yet.

Related Characters: Maverick Carter (speaker), Ma, Pops, Shawn, Dre, Pops, King

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 5

Explanation and Analysis

In the novel's opening chapter, Maverick and his best friend, King, are playing a pickup basketball game against Maverick's cousin Dre and the "crown" (leader) of the King Lords gang, Shawn. Maverick and King are losing badly, but people cheer for them because their fathers used to be very important in the gang.

This passage sets up how Maverick—and his wider community—see him. To most people, Maverick is "Li'l Don," his father's son. He's the son of the gang's former crown, and throughout the novel, Maverick implies that people expect him to follow in his father's footsteps and continue to move up through the ranks of the gang. Put simply, Maverick isn't his own person—he's his father's son first and foremost, and who Maverick is or what he wants comes secondary to association with Pops. And by closing this passage by saying that Maverick "guess[es] we not old

enough to go by our own names yet," Maverick suggests that he and King haven't come of age yet. They're still children who are overshadowed by their parents and haven't had the opportunity to show the world who they are.

Maverick makes it clear that he and King are still living with their fathers' reputations, nearly a decade since those men have been around Garden Heights. Later, Ma will tell Maverick that she shouldn't have to put her life on hold and wait for Pops while he's in prison—and the fact that the other men in the gang seem to still be so caught up in Pops and Zeke suggests that she's not the only one waiting for men who aren't going to return. This is something happening throughout the community, which means that Maverick risks upsetting his friends and fellow gang members if he decides that he doesn't want to be "Li'l Don."

Chapter 2 Quotes

☝☝ I study Iesha real hard. She got bags under her eyes she didn't have before. "Anybody helping you with him?"

"Help?" her momma says, like I cussed. "Who supposed to help her? Me?"

"C'mon now, Yolanda," says Ma. "This is a lot for anyone to handle, let alone a seventeen-year-old."

"T'uh! She wanna act grown, she can deal with this like she grown. By. Her. Self."

Iesha blink real fast.

I'm feeling real bad for her all of a sudden. "If he is mine, you won't be doing this alone no more, a'ight? I'll come over and help as much as I can."

Related Characters: Ma, Ms. Robinson, Maverick Carter (speaker), King Jr./Li'l Man/Seven, Iesha

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 21-22

Explanation and Analysis

As Maverick, Ma, Iesha, and Iesha's mother Ms. Robinson wait for the test results that will reveal King Jr.'s paternity, Maverick and Ma realize that Iesha isn't getting any help at home with her three-month-old son.

Maverick's tone when he asks Iesha if anyone is helping with King Jr. suggests that he expects new mothers to have support. In his understanding, people come together from the community to raise children, especially when those children are born to teenage parents. But Ms. Robinson

insists that at least in her house, this isn't true. Ilesha, she implies, is acting like an adult by having a child—and so it's her responsibility to deal with the consequences of her actions, all by herself. In Ms. Robinson's mind, Ilesha has given up any rights to support from her own parent because now, Ilesha has become a parent herself. Ma proposes that Ms. Robinson is doing a cruel thing by refusing to help her daughter. She, like Maverick, believes that new parents need support—especially from their parents, if they have access to their parents' help.

When Maverick offers to help with King Jr. if the baby is his, it shows that on some level, Maverick is preparing to step into a more adult role of becoming a caregiver. It's possible to see this as a sign of Maverick's growing maturity—but also, given how much Maverick struggles once he does become a full-time caregiver to King Jr., it's clear that Maverick has no idea what he's getting into. At this point, offering his help is something he's doing because he feels bad for Ilesha and wants to do the right thing, not because he actually understands what caring for an infant is like.

Chapter 3 Quotes

☝ “You good?”

Hell no. My life got thrown into a blender and I'm left with something I don't recognize. On top of that, I'm suddenly somebody's pops and I wish I had my pops.

Nah, man. I can't freak out. I gotta handle mine, on some G shit. “I ain't tripping.”

“You know it's okay to be scared, right?”

“Scared of what? A li'l baby?”



“Of all the stuff that come with having a li'l baby,” Dre says. “First time I held Adreanna, I cried. She was so beautiful, and she was stuck with me for a father.”

I look at my son, and damn, I feel that.

“I decided I was gon' be the kind of father she deserved,” he says. “I had to man up. That's what you gotta do, Mav. Man up.”

“Fool, I'm a man already,” I say.

Related Characters: Maverick Carter, Dre (speaker), Adreanna, Pops, King Jr./Li'l Man/Seven

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 34

Explanation and Analysis

When Dre comes to visit Maverick and learns that Li'l Man

is Maverick's son, Dre dispenses some parenting advice. Throughout the passage, it's important to pay attention to the two very different ways Maverick thinks and talks about suddenly being thrust into full-time parenthood. At times, Maverick's “gotta handle” his situation on his own and is “a man already.” With this, he tries to present himself as what he believes is appropriately masculine: he's in charge, he knows what he's doing, and he's mature enough to handle being a father.

But at the same time, in private, Maverick wishes his father, Pops, were around to guide him. And when Maverick reminds himself that he can't “freak out,” it implies that he's working very hard to follow through with this—he is freaking out, but he's trying to hide his emotions. Suddenly becoming the sole caretaker of an infant who he only found out was his son mere hours ago is, of course, life-changing—and Maverick's inner monologue reflects how difficult this is for him.

Dre, though, has been a father for three years now, and he feels like he can pass on some wisdom to Maverick. He makes it clear that part of being a father means accepting that Maverick will feel some uncomfortable emotions, like fear. In addition, Dre suggests that becoming a father has made him look critically at his life and how he'd like it to look. Now, with a daughter to care for, Dre wants to be the best father he can be—and he realized when she was born that he wasn't the kind of person she deserves.

Though Dre doesn't give Maverick any definite closure about any of this, he does generally encourage Maverick to realize that it's okay to feel his emotions and not know what he's doing. He also prepares Maverick for some soul-searching later in the novel, as Maverick begins to think through some of the same things that Dre did in regard to what kind of a man and father he'd like to be for his son.

Chapter 7 Quotes

☝ “I walked out on him last night, Dre.”

“Who? Your son?”



I nod. “He wouldn't stop—I didn't know how to make him stop crying man, and I was tired and—” I shake my head at myself. “I walked out of the house and left him crying.”

“Did you go back?”

I look up at him. “Of course I did.”

“That's what matters,” Dre says. “Parenting is hard, cuz. You gon' break sometimes. The most important thing is that you pull yourself together and go back, playboy.”

Related Characters: Dre, Maverick Carter (speaker), King Jr./Li'l Man/Seven

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 80

Explanation and Analysis

Maverick stops in to visit with Dre on the morning of his first day of school and admits that last night, when Seven wouldn't stop crying, Maverick walked out and left his son alone. The way Maverick frames this indicates that to him, walking out means that he failed dramatically. He implies that men and good parents don't just walk away when things get difficult—and that really, he should've been able to figure out how to get Li'l Man to stop crying. In other words, Maverick sees his actions as indicative only of his failures as a dad.

Dre, though, encourages Maverick to look at things slightly differently. Dre proposes that what matters is that even if Maverick has moments when he wants to walk away and give up, he ultimately decides to keep going. It's normal, Dre suggests, to occasionally want to just walk away and never come back. This is part of parenting, and it's important to enter into parenthood knowing that it's going to be hard and make a new parent doubt themselves and their abilities. What's most important is that a parent always returns to care for their children, no matter how hard doing so might be.

On Maverick's first day of work with Mr. Wyatt, Mr. Wyatt instructs Maverick on how to properly plant roses in their own bed. To Maverick, giving roses so much space seems silly. They're only pretty—they don't offer sustenance like the other fruits, vegetables, and greens in the garden. This shows that above all, Maverick prizes usefulness as a measure of worth, which perhaps reflects the ideas he's been taught about manhood. It's not enough to be beautiful or interesting—something, or someone, must be able to serve a purpose for Maverick to see them as worthwhile. And, in the same way, Maverick believes that a man is only worthwhile if he's of use to his family.

But when Mr. Wyatt insists that he likes flowers because they remind him that beauty can come from nothing, he starts to push back on Maverick's thinking. Mr. Wyatt's roses, throughout the novel, function as symbols for Maverick himself. Right now, Maverick thinks his life is worthwhile only because he can support his son and help Ma pay bills. He doesn't necessarily believe that he has inherent value simply because he's a person.

But since the novel equates Maverick with these roses, Mr. Wyatt's insistence that "beauty can come from much of nothing" offers hope that Maverick will be able to improve his life and his outlook over the course of the novel. He, like the roses, can overcome adversity and become something beautiful and worthwhile. Moreover, he can stand as proof that he, and other young Black men like him, are worthy of any space, care, and mentorship they need to thrive.

Chapter 8 Quotes

☝☝ "You only putting roses in this bed?"


"That's the plan. Roses need space to grow. Why you ask?"

He got greens, green beans, tomatoes, strawberries, blueberries—all kinds of fruits and vegetables out here. "Seems like a lot of space to give something you can't eat.

"You might be right," he admits. "I like to be reminded that beauty can come from much of nothing. To me that's the whole point of flowers."

Related Characters: Mr. Wyatt, Maverick Carter (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 102

Explanation and Analysis

Chapter 10 Quotes

☝☝ Pops told me the other day that grief something we all gotta carry. I never understood that till now. Feel like I got a boulder on my back. It weigh down my whole body, and I be wanting to cry out to make the pain go away.

Men ain't supposed to cry. We supposed to be strong enough to carry our boulders and everybody else's.

Related Characters: Maverick Carter (speaker), Adreanna, Keisha, Dre, Ma, Pops

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 128

Explanation and Analysis

On the morning of his cousin Dre's funeral, Maverick thinks about Pops saying that grief is something people have to physically carry. For Maverick, this manifests as feeling like

he's carrying around a boulder.

In Maverick's understanding, men aren't supposed to cry or show any emotion. They're supposed to be stoic, ignoring their own personal needs for the good of their family and the community. Indeed, Maverick goes on to explain exactly who needs his support. He lists Ma, Dre's parents, Keisha, and Adreanna—and he implies that they deserve help and support more than he does.



But although Maverick thinks it's his duty to be strong so that he can support his loved ones, he's still going through immense emotional turmoil. He wants to cry—crying, he believes, is the only thing that will make the pain go away. But because he doesn't think he, as a man, has any right to cry, Maverick cuts himself off from one of the healthy ways he could deal with his grief. To him, it's more important that he look like a man and take care of his family than it is to attend to his own grief and help himself feel better.

☝ “Weak,” P-Nut says, behind a fake cough. The big homies smirk. I'm nothing but a joke to them.

I storm toward the church. I found Dre with bullets in his head. The least Shawn could do is let me handle the dude who killed him.

But nah. I'm just a li'l kid who can't live up to his pops's name. I'm gon' prove all them fools wrong one day. Believe that.

Related Characters: P-Nut, Maverick Carter (speaker), King Jr./Li'l Man/Seven, Ant, Pops, Dre, Shawn

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 128

Explanation and Analysis

After Dre's funeral, Maverick approaches Shawn to tell him that he believes Ant, a member of the rival Garden Disciple gang, killed Dre. Though Shawn promises to look into this, he also firmly tells Maverick that Maverick can't be the one to kill Ant and avenge Dre's death.

To Maverick, this is insulting—not least because of P-Nut calling him weak. It shows him that the “big homies” (adult members) in the gang, like Shawn and P-Nut, see Maverick as a little kid who can't handle the responsibility of killing another person. But Maverick's immaturity shines through here: though he's clearly angry and grieving, he doesn't seem to have actually considered what killing Ant and avenging Dre's death might entail. To him, it's a privilege to get to “handle” Ant—there's no recognition that “handling”

Ant might lead to Maverick's own death or imprisonment.

So instead, Maverick focuses on the fact that Shawn's treatment makes him feel like a child. This is especially insulting given that, at this point, Maverick has been a full-time father to Seven for several months now. Though parenting is hard, it also makes Maverick feel mature and as though he's able to tackle more things—like killing Ant. And when Maverick vows to prove the rest of the “fools” wrong someday (that is, show that he's a capable adult by engaging in deadly violence), it shows just how motivated Maverick is by wanting to look mature and in control in front of his peers in the gang.

Chapter 13 Quotes

☝ “Everybody in the set already think I'm soft, Shawn.”

“So?” he says. “Forget what them fools think. You gotta live for you *and* Dre now, you feel me? You can do everything he didn't get a chance to do.”

I never thought of that.

“Raise your son. Be the best father you can be,” Shawn says. “That's how you honor Dre. A'ight?”

Related Characters: Shawn, Maverick Carter (speaker), Ma, Ant, King Jr./Li'l Man/Seven, Dre

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 157

Explanation and Analysis

On the first day that Maverick goes back to school after Dre's funeral, he skips his afternoon classes, and Shawn picks him up to drive around and give him a pep talk.

Maverick's lamentation that everyone in the gang thinks he's “soft” shows where Maverick's priorities lie at this point. He wants to look masculine and competent in front of his peers in the gang—that will, in his mind, turn him into a man. Importantly, Maverick is struggling so much with his “soft” reputation right now because Shawn is refusing to allow Maverick to kill Ant, the Garden Disciple they believe killed Dre. As Maverick understands it, he has to kill Ant to avenge Dre's death, show Dre his loyalty, and show the gang that he's brave and competent. So, by denying Maverick this opportunity, Shawn essentially forces Maverick to stay “soft” in the eyes of their fellow gangsters.

Shawn, however, suggests that Maverick is getting far too caught up in what the other King Lords think of him. What's

important, Shawn suggests, is that Maverick stays alive and lives his life in a way that would make Dre proud. This means taking care of Seven and Ma, and earning “clean money” to help support Ma and pay the bills. Shawn seems well aware that Dre wasn’t as enamored with gang life as Shawn is—Dre seemed, at various points, to wish he didn’t have to be part of the gang or sell drugs to support his family. And though Shawn might not understand Dre’s reasoning, he also feels compelled to help Maverick essentially live out Dre’s dream. This is how both Shawn and Maverick can honor Dre and demonstrate that they took his dreams and aspirations seriously when he was alive.

☝ “Son, one of the biggest lies ever told is that Black men don’t feel emotions. Guess it’s easier to not see us as human when you think we’re heartless. Fact of the matter is, we feel things. Hurt, pain, sadness, all of it. We got a right to show them feelings as much as anybody else.”

Related Characters: Mr. Wyatt (speaker), Shawn, Dre, Maverick Carter

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 163-64

Explanation and Analysis

Maverick is just finishing up a shift in Mr. Wyatt’s garden. He showed up to work high after smoking cannabis with Shawn—and he’s just admitted to Mr. Wyatt that he chose to smoke to try to take his mind off of Dre’s death.

Maverick has said before that as far as he’s concerned, men aren’t supposed to show their emotions. He’s acknowledged that he feels them—he’s said before that he wants to cry, as that seems like the only way to make himself feel better after Dre’s death. But he feels unable to do this because, in order to be what he thinks is properly masculine, he can’t acknowledge that he feels these difficult emotions at all.

But Mr. Wyatt proposes that that’s an unhealthy way to go through life—and it contributes to one of “the biggest lies ever told.” Essentially, Mr. Wyatt links the cultural expectation for Black men to not show their emotions with the idea that Black men don’t have emotions at all. In other words, by pretending difficult emotions don’t exist for Black men, it makes it easier for people to believe that those emotions actually don’t exist. And this, in Mr. Wyatt’s understanding, is one of the reasons why Black people suffer so much from racism and casual cruelty. If nobody believes that Black men have emotions, it’s much easier to

dehumanize them and not see them as deserving of empathy.

Mr. Wyatt also proposes that the only way to change this greater cultural system is for Black men to acknowledge that they experience a full range of emotions—and show those emotions. This will not only allow grieving Black men like Maverick a healthier way to deal with grief; it will also help the culture shift to see Black men as emotional people deserving of empathy and compassion, just like anyone else.


Chapter 15 Quotes

☝ The person who killed my cousin got killed.

It’s been a weird three weeks since it happened. ‘Cause Ant was shot at a school function it was all over the news. His parents cried on TV, and I realized he had parents. Like Dre. Some kids at school were really tore up over his death, and I realized he had friends. Like Dre. At the stadium, he got a memorial in the parking lot with flowers and balloons. Like Dre.

Everybody get mourned by somebody, I guess. Even murderers.

Related Characters: Maverick Carter (speaker), Shawn, Pops, Dre, Ant

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 173

Explanation and Analysis

Several weeks after Dre’s funeral, his supposed killer, a Garden Disciple named Ant, is shot and killed at a football game. This forces Maverick to confront some uncomfortable truths.

Prior to Ant’s death, Ant existed as a one-dimensional antagonist in Maverick’s mind. It was impossible for Maverick to understand that although Ant supported a different, rival gang, he may have shared a lot of the same concerns as Maverick does. It’s only when Ant dies that Maverick has to confront the fact that they might not have been so different.

Realizing that Ant had parents, friends, and a community who loved him—just like Dre did—forces Maverick to see Ant as human. This helps him start to understand that all people, no matter their gang affiliation, deserve kindness—and that in Garden Heights, everyone is just trying to support their families. They may choose different gangs to do this, but the goal remains the same: make money, enjoy the protection the gang affords, and be able to

live one's life comfortably.

However, Maverick isn't totally ready to see Ant as a person, as evidenced by reducing Ant down to a "murderer" in the final line. It's worth considering that Maverick knows and loves several murderers in the King Lords, including Pops (who implies at one point that he's killed people before) and Shawn (who has tattoos commemorating the two men he killed). But Maverick doesn't imply this dehumanizing descriptor to Pops and Shawn, because they're people he knows and loves. In this way, Maverick's gang affiliation and his unwavering loyalty to his family causes him to dehumanize other people, like Ant.

Chapter 17 Quotes

☝☝ I'm feeling bold as hell, and things I've been scared to say suddenly not so scary. "You left us. Got Ma busting her ass to take care of me and put money on your books. I had to join a gang 'cause of you. You can't come at either of us."

"What I did ain't got *shit* to do with the fact you keep knocking girls up."

"Yeah, a'ight, I made some bad decisions," I admit. "I'm gon' be there for my kids. Unlike you."

He can't say nothing, like I thought.

Related Characters: Pops, Maverick Carter (speaker), King Jr./Li'l Man/Seven, Lisa Montgomery, Ma

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 205

Explanation and Analysis

When Ma, Maverick, and Seven go to visit Pops in prison, Pops gets upset with both Ma and Maverick when he learns that Lisa and Maverick are expecting a baby. So, when Pops accuses Maverick of not thinking and of abandoning his family, Maverick decides he can't take the hypocrisy anymore.

Here, the novel begins to show the damage that families suffer when people sell drugs—and particularly when they go to prison for selling drugs. Pops sees himself as still playing an important parental role in Maverick's life. As he sees it, he's still well within his rights as a parent to scold Maverick and insist that Maverick can do better. But to Maverick, fathering another child pales in comparison to getting arrested and imprisoned for drug-dealing. Even if Maverick is going to be a father of two before he turns 18, he believes he'll still be able to be there and provide his

children more support than Pops was able to provide him. What's most important to Maverick as he figures out how to be a father is physically being there for his children. He may appreciate Pops's support over the phone, but he craves—and wants to give his children—physical time and attention.

When Maverick mentions Ma having to work so hard because Pops is gone, he also gets at another negative consequence of having a parent in prison. In prison, Pops isn't able to help financially support the family—that task falls entirely to Ma, and now to Maverick as well. Caring for Seven has shown Maverick how inadequate one parent's paycheck is when it comes to supporting a baby, and he now has a better understanding of what Ma has gone through over the last decade. So, prison isn't just destroying Pops's relationship with Ma and Maverick—it's also seriously damaging the family's ability to get ahead financially.

Chapter 18 Quotes

☝☝ "I felt bad for leaving him and not being able to handle it."

"That don't mean you disappear, baby," Ma says. I'm sorry that your momma didn't support you like she should've and that you had to go through so much yourself. But you have responsibilities now. Seven needs you as much as he needs Maverick."

"Not if I get in that bad space again, he don't," Ilesha murmurs. [...]

Ma rub her shoulder. 'If it's not, you're not alone. It takes a village to raise a child. Seven has a big one. That means that you do too.'

Related Characters: Ma, Ilesha (speaker), Ms. Robinson, King Jr./Li'l Man/Seven, Maverick Carter

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 218-19

Explanation and Analysis

When King brings Ilesha with him to the Carter family Thanksgiving meal, Ma speaks to Maverick and Ilesha privately about how Ilesha abandoning Seven has impacted everyone involved.

Notably, Ilesha found herself in a situation that, to her, seemed impossible. Her mother, Ms. Robinson, believed that Ilesha needed to handle Seven all on her own, since she made the mistake of getting pregnant with him in the first place. But dealing with a baby all on her own was extremely

difficult for Iesha, both physically and emotionally—so, she abandoned Seven with Maverick and Ma.

Ma understands how difficult things were for Iesha—but she also suggests that as a parent, it's unacceptable for Iesha to abandon her son. And this is true, she insists, even if Iesha does get into "that bad space again" (the novel implies that she's struggling with undiagnosed postpartum depression). Ma proposes that parents have a responsibility to be there for their children, no matter how hard it gets—but she also makes it clear that no parent has to raise their child alone. Iesha now has Maverick and Ma to help, in addition to the rest of Maverick's family and some of the more supportive King Lords members. In other words, Iesha is never going to find herself totally on her own when it comes to Seven, even if she falls into a depression again.

Chapter 19 Quotes

☝☝ "We need to start calling you Old Man Carter," Rico says. "I take that back. My grandma get out more than you *and* she fresher than you."

"Whatever," I mumble.

The first bell ring for class. I follow Rico and Junie down the hall as they discuss the dance and their plans. It's like they speaking a language I ain't fluent in anymore. The words real familiar, but they done lost all meaning for me.

Related Characters: Maverick Carter, Rico (speaker), King Jr./Li'l Man/Seven, Junie

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 228

Explanation and Analysis

At school one day, as Rico and Junie discuss their plans to rent a limo and tuxedos for the winter dance, Maverick feels alienated and as though his friends are speaking a different language.

In this moment, Maverick begins to see the consequences of fatherhood on his friendships. Rico and Junie don't seem at all sympathetic to the fact that Maverick not only has to buy food and diapers for Seven, but also needs to dedicate most of his time to his young son. To them, this is unfathomable—life for them consists of going to dances, pursuing girls, and spending time on the streets with each other. This is also why Rico likens Maverick to his grandmother; only old people, in Rico's understanding, would choose to not go to the winter dance. The thought of willingly choosing to prioritize a baby isn't comprehensible

to them yet.

This makes Maverick feel less like he belongs with his friends, and less like he belongs at school at all. He seems to exist in an entirely different world from them, since he no longer knows the language of high school, nor does he think an education or a normal adolescence are possible for him now. In this way, becoming a father has forced Maverick to grow up and reevaluate his priorities—and it begins to pave the way for Maverick to later decide that he'd like to leave the gang. What starts as this suspicion that he no longer belongs with his friends ultimately grows into a strong belief that he'd like to do something different with his life.

Chapter 20 Quotes

☝☝ It kinda peeve me how life set up. Here I am, tryna make money to keep my momma's lights on. Meanwhile, some rich brat might hit me up tomorrow, offering to spend a couple hundred for an "experience." He never think what that money mean to somebody like me. Then who gotta watch out for the cops? Not him. I'm the one who gotta glance over my shoulder 24-7.

Related Characters: Maverick Carter (speaker), Ma, Pops, Lisa Montgomery

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 248

Explanation and Analysis

As Maverick waits outside Lisa's Catholic school so he can pick her up and head back to Garden Heights, he sells drugs to rich students at the school. To Maverick, the differences between him and the rich kids he sells to are massive and impossible to ignore.

For Maverick, selling drugs means the difference between having food, electricity, and a place to live. It's essential that he continue to sell because, in his experience, selling drugs is the only way to make enough money to actually stay afloat in Garden Heights. Given the limited economic opportunities in the Garden, dealing drugs seems like the only surefire way to get by.

But this doesn't mean that dealing isn't extremely dangerous. Maverick acknowledges this here, when he notes that his buyers aren't the ones who have to worry about being arrested or imprisoned. And though Maverick doesn't say it in so many words, he also understands that if he's arrested, his ability to provide for his family disappears. Just as Pops can't provide for Ma and help her with utility



bills from prison, Ma won't be able to rely on Maverick for help with bills anymore if he's arrested. Drugs, Maverick shows here, are an extremely dangerous line of work—but only for those who *sell* drugs. For his buyers, the fun “experience” of doings drugs is all that matters.

Chapter 21 Quotes

☝☝ “No offense, Mr. Wyatt, but your nephew seem like a nerd. As for Carlos, his momma kept him and Lisa in the house. Of course they didn't need protection. Anyway, I'm Li'l Don. Everybody expected me to join.”

“Because the apple doesn't fall far from the tree?” Mr. Wyatt asks. “However, it can roll away from the tree. It simply need a little push.”

Related Characters: Mr. Wyatt, Maverick Carter (speaker), Lisa Montgomery, Jamal, Carlos Montgomery, Pops

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 263

Explanation and Analysis

One afternoon in the store, Mr. Wyatt tries to get Maverick to think about his future; they're discussing whether it was actually necessary for Maverick to join the King Lords gang. Mr. Wyatt has just pointed out that Carlos and his nephew, Jamal, aren't in gangs and are doing just fine.

Maverick makes it clear that while Mr. Wyatt might be right that Carlos and Jamal are leading very different lives from other young men in Garden Heights, their trajectories aren't something that every young man can aspire to.

Maverick writes off Jamal altogether when he calls him a “nerd”; this, to Maverick explains why Jamal didn't need to join a gang. He didn't have to because he wasn't interested in being on the streets in the first place. In Carlos's case, Maverick suggests that if a parent is willing and able to keep their kids inside, those kids don't have to worry about gangs either. But this, Maverick implies, is a privilege not available to all kids.

Maverick had to join the King Lords at age 12 for protection, since Pops made so many enemies before he was imprisoned. The novel implies that if Maverick wanted to leave the house without fearing for his life, he needed the gang's protection—which meant he needed to join up. Gang affiliation, Maverick insists, is the only way for young people to be safe in the neighborhood if their parents can't keep them off the streets altogether.

But at the same time, Maverick also insists he didn't really

have a choice of whether or not to join up—everyone expected him to, since he's the former crown's son. In this way, Maverick doesn't see joining the King Lords as a decision he made; it's a decision that other people made for him. But Mr. Wyatt sees things a little differently: though he acknowledges that Maverick may have been raised to believe he needs to be like Pops, this isn't actually true. Maverick might not be able to change the circumstances he was born into, but it is possible to make choices about what he does with his life and what he values. And Mr. Wyatt acknowledges that Maverick is going to need help and guidance to do this, which is why he suggests the apple needs a “little push.” The person pushing the apple would be Maverick's mentor—in this case, Mr. Wyatt himself.

Chapter 22 Quotes

☝☝ “Word around the school is that you've had some life-changing developments this year,” he says.

I wait for the *look*. I swear, when grown folks know I got two kids, I see myself become trash in their eyes. It's like they see my babies as trash, too, just 'cause I made them so young. Hell nah.

Related Characters: Maverick Carter, Mr. Clayton (speaker), Granny, Lisa Montgomery, King Jr./Li'l Man/Seven

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 271-72

Explanation and Analysis

When Maverick goes to Mr. Clayton's office to talk about his future (that is, life after high school), he initially bristles when Mr. Clayton implies that he's heard about Maverick's son and future child.

For Maverick, this is extremely uncomfortable. Even though people in his life like his Granny have previously suggested that it's not unexpected for a young man like Maverick to have a baby at a young age, Maverick shows here that he still encounters people who think less of him for it. And experiencing this kind of prejudice makes Maverick less open to what Mr. Clayton goes on to say (that Maverick can't graduate high school and will either need to repeat the 12th grade or get his GED). The novel shows that this kind of prejudice, then, can keep kids like Maverick from getting the help and support they need.

Maverick's reaction also shows how he's developing as a

father. While at first it was barely comprehensible to him that he even had a son, now he's fiercely protective of his children and their dignity. They don't matter less because they have young parents—they matter just as much as anyone else, and Maverick is going to make sure that people treat them and talk about them appropriately.

☛ What's the point of a high school diploma or a GED? Nah, for real. People claim they'll make my life easier, but all a high school diploma did for Ma was help her get two jobs that don't pay enough.

Nah, man. I'm done with this school shit. It's time to put my focus on making money.

Related Characters: Maverick Carter (speaker), Mr. Clayton, Ma

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 274

Explanation and Analysis

Maverick has just walked out of his meeting with the school counselor, Mr. Clayton. In the meeting, Maverick learns that he either needs to get his GED or repeat the 12th grade if he wants to get a high school diploma.

At this point, Maverick feels like everything is out to get him and make his life difficult. Though Mr. Clayton pointed out that he's seen plenty of teenaged parents figure out how to juggle school and parenthood, that clearly wasn't something Maverick could do—and now he has to face the consequences. But in his mind, the consequences really aren't all that great. Now, all he has to do is “mak[e] money,” presumably by selling drugs.



Though Maverick seems to say that a diploma or a GED would be useless from a place of anger, mentioning Ma also shows that he's seen firsthand that he's right. Ma may have graduated high school, but because there are so few economic opportunities for people in Garden Heights, she's stuck working two jobs and still has to ask for extensions on her utility bills sometimes. To Maverick, this is unacceptable. Up until this point, he's wanted to follow Dre's advice and make “clean money.” But now, he realizes that “clean money” isn't going to pay the bills—while drug money, dangerous as it may be, will.

Chapter 23 Quotes

☛ “Do you love Pops?”

“I do,” she says. “I'll always love Adonis, and I'll always be there for him. I also have to love myself. All of that 'ride or die' stuff, it's nice until you feel like you're dying from not living. Adonis made choices that put his life at a standstill. He didn't have to sell drugs; he chose to. I shouldn't have to put my life on hold because of his decisions.”

Related Characters: Ma, Maverick Carter (speaker), King, Moe, Pops

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 286

Explanation and Analysis

After Ma admits that she's bisexual and has been in a relationship with her female friend Moe for several years, Maverick is curious if she still loves Pops.

Ma makes a number of important points here as she gives her answer. She suggests to Maverick that people don't have to be in love or even married to support each other, and that she can love more than one person. She can, in other words, continue to support Pops financially and emotionally while he's in prison—and at the same time, she can focus on her own needs and desires. Then, she also voices how trapped she feels being forced to care for Pops while also ignoring her own desires. It's essential, she suggests, for people to be able to make decisions for themselves and focus on what makes them happy—even if those decisions are difficult for other people to bear. Finally, she also makes the case that while Pops made choices that Ma is still having to contend with, that doesn't mean she needs to willingly sacrifice her well-being and her happiness for him. He's serving his sentence for dealing drugs in prison—and Ma essentially suggests that she doesn't have to serve a similar sentence in her own home.

Ma's reasoning is profound for Maverick. For instance, it's possible to apply Ma's reasoning for entering into a relationship with Moe publicly to Maverick's later choice to think about leaving the King Lords and distancing himself from King. Though King provided Maverick with close friendship and a lot of support for years, Maverick ultimately finds that King will only be there for him if Maverick behaves a very certain way—and in the end, Maverick decides he doesn't want to lead the King Lords and deals drugs with King. And further, it's possible to see that Maverick, like Ma, is sacrificing and putting his life on hold because Pops sold drugs with the King Lords. Pops's involvement in the gang is what necessitated Maverick's

entry into the gang to begin with—and now, it’s holding Maverick back from reaching his full potential and doing what he wants to do with his life. Thus, although Maverick doesn’t voice any of this now, Ma essentially encourages him to think about his choices and do what’s best for him.

Chapter 24 Quotes

☝ Lisa stare at me real hard. “You’re selling drugs with King again, aren’t you?”

I sigh. “Man, look—”

“You know what? Don’t answer that,” she says. “Do whatever you want, Maverick. Me and my baby will be all right.”

“There you go, acting like I won’t be around.”

“Because you won’t!” Lisa says. “I make plans, knowing that. My baby needs one of us to think about the future.”

She don’t get it. She really don’t get it.

Related Characters: Maverick Carter, Lisa Montgomery (speaker), Dre, Shawn, Pops, King Jr./Li’l Man/Seven, Mr. Wyatt

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 306

Explanation and Analysis

Maverick and Lisa are on their way home from touring Markham, the college Lisa wants to attend. Maverick is still trying to win Lisa over with grand gestures, but Lisa isn’t convinced—especially when she ascertains that Maverick is still selling drugs.

Though Maverick seemed to really enjoy his job with Mr. Wyatt and even seems like he’d like to continue with it, he doesn’t see legal employment as the best way for him to make money to support his family. Lisa implies that she wants Maverick to be thinking about legal employment, rather than selling drugs illegally. But Lisa is also comparatively privileged and doesn’t seem to fully grasp Maverick’s economic situation. Maverick is selling drugs because, in his experience, drug-dealing is the only way to make enough money to support a family. Mr. Wyatt’s paychecks are helpful, but they don’t make enough to support Seven—let alone Lisa’s baby. It’s hurtful for Maverick when Lisa doesn’t seem to be able to grasp that.

Lisa, though, also has a point. Though Maverick insists he’s going to be around for her and the baby, there’s no way for him to guarantee that. Dealing drugs is illegal—and Maverick has already seen Pops and Shawn go to prison for

drug and gang-related crimes. Dre, meanwhile, was murdered because of his association with the King Lords. So, Lisa isn’t necessarily overreacting when she doesn’t think she can trust Maverick to be there for her and her future child. Simply by selling drugs and remaining involved with the gang, Maverick’s life (and his ability to provide for his family) will always be in question.

Chapter 26 Quotes

☝ There’s a lot of things I never wanted to know ‘bout my pops. It come with the territory when your father is Big Don. I’d rather hear that he bought kids’ shoes and fed families at holidays. Not that he got people hooked on crack.

Sometimes one person’s hero is another person’s monster, or in my case, father. Yet it’s hard for me to judge him when I’m plotting to kill somebody else’s father. But see, taking Red out is the best way for Dre to get justice. It ain’t much different from a judge sentencing Red to death row.

I think.

Related Characters: Maverick Carter (speaker), Dre, Red, Bus Stop Tony, Pops

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 313

Explanation and Analysis

Maverick has been searching for evidence to prove that Red killed Dre. He’s just spoken to Bus Stop Tony, a local crack cocaine addict, gave Maverick the information he needs and also informed Maverick that Pops used to deal him crack—and even gave him his first dose.

Though Tony talked about Pops as being generous and spoke of him like a “hero,” Maverick finds it disturbing to learn that Pops got people addicted to drugs. It makes it more difficult for Maverick to hold Pops up as someone he should admire and aspire to being like. As Maverick starts to think about this, though, it helps him conceptualize who he wants to be. When he says that he wishes his father had clothed and fed kids, Maverick shows that he values doing those things—and in the future, he might choose to put his energies into helping vulnerable community members rather than dealing drugs. Put another way, as Maverick starts to learn more about who Pops really was, he starts to suspect that he should think of Pops as an example of what to avoid.

But Maverick is also in a difficult emotional spot right now,

as he's currently plotting to murder Red to avenge Dre's death. Because of this, Maverick doesn't feel like he can really say anything bad about Pops's actions, since his own seem just as bad or worse. Though Maverick realizes this—and even seems to recognize that he's planning to do something terrible—he nevertheless tries to justify his actions by suggesting he's doing the just thing. This, he believes, is how he'll avenge Dre's murder—which will make his actions noble and good. But however much Maverick might try to convince himself of this, the questioning tone here suggests that Maverick doesn't believe it. He knows that he's going to do something horrible and irreversible; he's just trying to talk himself into it.

☝ “Daddy’s here. It’s okay.”

Them few words do me in. I say them to Seven all the time, but I ain't heard them myself in years, and they everything I ever needed. “Dre should be here,” I blubber.”

“He should be.”

“He deserve better.”

“He did.”

“I wanna do this for him. I got to.”

Pops smile so sad it's hard to call it that. “There were a lot of things I thought I had to do, too. Reality was, I only had to be there for you and your momma, and I failed at that.”

Related Characters: Maverick Carter, Pops (speaker), Red, Ma, Dre

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 319

Explanation and Analysis

As Maverick prepares to avenge Dre's death by killing Red, he goes to visit Pops in prison. He's seeking Pops's permission or blessing to kill Red, but Pops refuses to give it.

As Maverick sobs, he insists that he has to avenge Dre's death. He doesn't believe there's another option—the only way forward is to kill Red. This, in Maverick's mind, is how he'll show Dre his loyalty and how he'll make himself a man. It'll also allow him to prove to the rest of the gang that he's not “soft,” as they've previously accused him of being. To Maverick, killing Red is how he's going to fully come of age and make himself a man in his peers' eyes.

But Pops suggests that Maverick isn't looking at things quite the way he should be. Manhood, Pops suggests, is a matter of being there for one's family, especially one's kids. And

although Pops ultimately failed to be there for Ma and for Maverick, he can encourage Maverick to learn from his mistakes. Though Maverick ultimately chooses not to kill Red for a variety of reasons, Pops's advice here is certainly very meaningful to him. This helps him reconceptualize masculinity and manhood as being about caring for others—not killing for revenge.

Chapter 27-28 Quotes

☝ But when it comes to the streets, there's rules.

Nobody will ever write them down, and you'll never find them in a book. It's stuff you need in order to survive the moment your momma let you out the house. Kinda like how you gotta breathe even when it's hard to.

If there was a book, the most important section would be on family, and the first rule would be:

When somebody kills your family, you kill them.

Related Characters: Maverick Carter (speaker), King Jr./Li'l Man/Seven, Pops, Ma, Lisa Montgomery, Dre, Red

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 323-24

Explanation and Analysis

As Maverick prepares to kill Red to avenge Dre's death, he explains for the reader why he has to murder Red. Doing so, he notes, is necessary according to the rules that guide life on the street.

Maverick explains that these rules are something that everyone in Garden Heights is aware of. They're the rules that dictate how they move through the world as to keep themselves safe. On its own, this suggests that life in Garden Heights is dangerous—to require rules like this implies that survival isn't guaranteed.

Then, it's significant that Maverick insists that the most important section of a theoretical book on the rules would be about family. This reflects Maverick's own feelings about his family. To him, they're his world—he adores Ma and Seven, he appreciates Pops for what Pops has been able to do for him and advise him on. And up until Dre's death, Dre was Maverick's most important mentor—so although Dre isn't as biologically close to Maverick as Seven, Ma, or Pops, Dre is still an important family member to Maverick. And this means that in order to properly show his loyalty to his family, Maverick needs to murder Red to avenge Dre's death.

It's also worth comparing this rule to the passage that opens the novel. The book opens with Maverick playing a pickup game of basketball and losing in front of Lisa. The fact that he insists that the most important rule of "streetball" would be "Don't get your ass beat in front of a fine girl, especially if she your girl" speaks to how much Maverick has changed since that basketball game. Then, Maverick was an innocent kid with a lot on his mind—but he was most concerned about not looking inept in front of Lisa. Now, though, Maverick is stepping into adulthood, and family is the most important thing to him. As he matures, the rules he considers most important will change to fit his new phase of life.

Chapter 29 Quotes

☝☝ "Why didn't you do it?"

"I thought of my kids, my momma, and...and you. What it would do to y'all if I got caught or killed." I close my eyes. Tears slip outta them. "I'm such a fucking coward."

"No," Lisa murmurs. "You sound like a man to me."

I look at her. "How? That fool murdered Dre, Lisa. And what I do? I let him run away. What kinda justice is that?"

"It wouldn't have been justice if you threw your life away to kill him."

I almost laugh. "My life ain't worth much. I just didn't wanna put my babies through that. I know what it's like to not have a father around."

Related Characters: Maverick Carter, Lisa Montgomery (speaker), Ma, Red, Pops, King Jr./Li'l Man/Seven

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 329

Explanation and Analysis

After explaining to Lisa that he couldn't bring himself to shoot and kill Red, Maverick tries to articulate why he made this choice. Everything Maverick says shows how deeply he cares for his family. He wants to be able to support them—and he recognizes that if he were to shoot Red, he'd be at an increased risk of being arrested or shot himself. After all, he implies that everyone in Garden Heights plays by the same rules. So, one of Red's family members would, presumably, take it as their duty to murder Maverick to avenge Red's death. This, Maverick realizes, creates a cycle of violence that makes it impossible for young people to care for their families.

Since Maverick has, for most of the novel, associated masculinity with being stoic and violent, he believes that deciding not to kill Red was an actual failure, not just a choice. In his mind, he failed to be a man and failed to avenge Red's death. But Lisa provides some framing for how Maverick can think about this going forward. Indeed, she suggests that what actually makes Maverick a man right now is that he chose to show Red mercy and compassion—and he chose to be there for his family members. In other words, Lisa suggests that Maverick should focus on all of the positives that will come of this decision, such as being around to watch his kids grow and being able to help Ma with the bills. Maverick has essentially given himself another chance at life—one he wouldn't have gotten had he pulled the trigger.

Maverick also acknowledges how difficult it is to grow up without a father. He's been on his own in that regard since Pops went to prison when Maverick was eight. And though Maverick doesn't give much insight into what exactly life was like without Pops, he does make it clear that life was more difficult than it needed to be. Ma has to work harder, and Maverick had to get a job before he might have otherwise. Maverick has also missed out on a lot of bonding time and opportunities to get advice from Pops. All of that, he realizes, have made it all the more difficult for him to grow up. Now that he's a father himself, he can do better than his own Pops by choosing to not put himself in a position where it's likely he'll be taken away from his kids.



Chapter 30 Quotes


☝☝ "Looks like you're right. These canes need to be snipped."

"Because they won't help them grow, right?"

"Mmm-hmm. It's kind like how we have to do with ourselves. Get rid of things that don't do us any good. If it won't help the rose grow, you've gotta let it go."

Related Characters: Maverick Carter, Mr. Wyatt (speaker), King

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 341

Explanation and Analysis

Just after Maverick tells King that he wants to stop dealing drugs with him, Maverick lets himself into Mr. Wyatt's

garden to admire the blooming roses. Though it's unclear exactly when this is taking place, it's still late winter or early spring, so Maverick is shocked that they're blooming at all.

As Maverick and Mr. Wyatt inspect the canes (the roses' stems), Maverick shows that he's been listening to Mr. Wyatt. Now, Maverick can look at the plants and see what parts of them are dead and not doing the plant any good—those are the parts that need to be cut out and thrown away. The fact that Maverick has this knowledge at all speaks to how important his relationship with Mr. Wyatt has become. Maverick certainly likes gardening on its own terms, but he also likes gardening because it's a way to connect with the man who's become his mentor.

Mr. Wyatt then suggests that it's possible to look at the roses as a metaphor for their own lives. It's essential, Mr. Wyatt implies, to continually take stock and decide what's not necessary in life anymore—whether that be things or people. This is especially significant right now, since Maverick has essentially just made the choice to cut King out of his life. With this, Maverick shows that he doesn't think King is helping him grow—indeed, King is holding him back and keeping him in a situation where he has to sell drugs and rely on the gang to get by. Taking Mr. Wyatt's metaphor to heart, meanwhile, will allow Maverick the tools and the freedom to make decisions for himself and find a better, more fulfilling path for his life.

●● “You don't owe me an explanation,” he says. “Like I told you the other day, you're becoming your own man. You don't need my permission or approval.”

“Yes, sir.”

Pops take another deep breath. “On some real shit, son? There's a lot of grown men in the game who don't wanna be in it. They don't have the guts to admit it like you do. They too caught up or scared of what people will think. They end up accepting that they stuck.”

Related Characters: Pops (speaker), Red, Maverick Carter

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 344-45

Explanation and Analysis

When Pops calls Maverick the morning after Maverick almost kills Red, Maverick admits to Pops that he's considering getting out of the King Lords. Though Maverick initially tries to justify his decision, Pops insists he doesn't need to hear it.

Even though Maverick joined the King Lords because Pops was the gang's former “crown” (leader), Pops nevertheless proposes here that Maverick doesn't have to follow in his father's footsteps. As Maverick grows and becomes his own man, he gets to make his own choices and decide how he lives his life and what he values. And Pops also makes it very clear that Maverick shouldn't consistently come to him, hoping for approval. Maverick came to Pops about a week ago hoping that Pops would give him permission to kill Red—and Pops wouldn't. With that, and with the advice Pops gives here, Pops suggests that there's a limit as to how long parents can reasonably expect to offer their kids advice. At some point, it's necessary to let children make their own decisions as they become adults.

Pops also makes it clear that making decisions for oneself is a brave thing to do. There are a lot of people, he suggests, who are living lives they don't want to be living, but who are too afraid to try to get out. Even though Maverick is young, Pops implies that Maverick is in some ways more of a man than these other men, simply because he's able to identify what he wants and voice those desires.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1

There are rules on the streets. None of them are written down, but if they were, the first rule would be to not get beaten at basketball in front of an attractive girl—especially if that girl is your girlfriend. That’s what’s happening to Maverick and King now. Though Maverick’s girlfriend Lisa cheers for him, he and King haven’t scored a single point, while Shawn and Maverick’s older cousin Dre have 11. To be fair, Maverick’s head isn’t in the game because of “what’s going down today.”

As Maverick exchanges insults with Shawn, everyone on the sidelines laughs. They have to laugh when Shawn makes jokes, though—he’s the crown of the King Lords gang. Someone on the sideline cheers for Maverick and King, calling them “Li’l Don” and “Li’l Zeke.” Don, Maverick’s Pops, used to be the crown; and Zeke, King’s dad, was his right-hand man. The game begins again, and Shawn dunks the ball. King takes it hard, and a guy on the sidelines, P-Nut, taunts King and Maverick. King threatens to beat P-Nut up, but he decides to walk away across the court instead.

Maverick mutters to Shawn and Dre that King has a lot on his mind, and Dre reminds Shawn that “They find out today.” Shawn insists it doesn’t matter—King needs to control his temper, or he’ll be beaten up. Maverick explains to the reader that there are levels in the King Lords. Middle schoolers are “youngins,” while high schoolers like Maverick and King are “li’l homies” who sell cannabis and recruit. Dre and Shawn are “big homies” who keep the “li’l homies” in line, in addition to selling “harder stuff.” The big homies also take care of things with the Garden Disciples (GDs) on the east side of Garden Heights. Getting beaten up by the big homies is a big deal, so Maverick promises to talk to King.

Maverick runs after King and reminds him that they have to keep their cool. They’ve been selling harder stuff behind the “big homies” backs for six months, and they’ll be in big trouble if the big homies find out. But Maverick needs the money to help his momma out. King slaps Maverick’s palm, and the boys hug. King assures Maverick that “the other thing” is going to work out, and then he leaves the park.

The first rule of the streets that Maverick gives shows that he’s very concerned with keeping up appearances. It’s important to him to look cool and competent in front of his girlfriend, Lisa—but he’s unable to do that today because of “what’s going down today.” Though he doesn’t explain what this means, this suggests that something huge and potentially life-changing is in the works for him.



Here, the novel introduces that Maverick and the other young men here are in a gang. This means that the other boys defer to Shawn (the “crown,” or head of the gang). Maverick and King, meanwhile, are known by their fathers’ names suggests that these two haven’t yet forged their own identities in the gang. They’re still struggling to assert themselves as anything other than their fathers’ sons.



Here, it becomes clear that the King Lords sell drugs—both cannabis and “harder” street drugs. Maverick also lays out that the gang has a specific structure and rules that members have to follow. This means that King needs to behave a certain way, no matter what else might be on his mind. In this way, the gang perhaps keeps its members from dealing with difficult emotions in a healthy way, since it seems that showing any vulnerability puts members at risk of violence.



Maverick has deeper concerns than just what’s going on later (presumably, “the other thing”). He and King are going against how the King Lords are supposed to work and are selling drugs they shouldn’t be selling. For Maverick, this is a financial necessity: it’s the only way he can help his mother with bills.



Maverick returns to Lisa, who teases him about needing to practice. She plays basketball at school, and she's better than Maverick. They've been together since Maverick first saw her at a game years ago. He's only messed up in their relationship once, and it was a huge mistake. Dre's three-year-old daughter, Adreanna, teases Maverick for losing, and Dre picks Adreanna up. Lisa asks if everyone is going to the party tonight, but Keisha, Dre's fiancé, insists that they're not going. Having Adreanna changed Dre—now, he doesn't party anymore. Maverick even suspects he'd like to stop being a King Lord, but that's impossible. Maverick insists he's going, and Dre gives him a meaningful look. Dre knows what's going on later, but Lisa doesn't.

Lisa reminds Maverick that next year, they'll be partying in college. Maverick pulls a gold and diamond necklace that spells his name out of his pocket and gives it to Lisa. Dre wants to know where Maverick got the money for it, so Maverick lies that he made enough doing odd jobs. Just then, a horn blares from the parking lot, and Lisa's brother, Carlos, shouts for Lisa. Carlos hates Maverick, so Maverick makes a point to help Lisa into the car and flip Carlos off.

As soon as Carlos pulls away, Maverick's Ma drives up. She teases Maverick about smelling awful and insists that he doesn't have time to shower. They only have 15 minutes before they have to meet Iesha and her momma. Ma assures Maverick that whatever happens, she'll be here for him. As Maverick gets in the car, Shawn runs over to say hi to Ma and assures her he's taking care of Maverick. Pops made so many enemies that Maverick had to join the King Lords, even though Ma didn't want him to. Ma thinks the gang thing is temporary, and she wants Maverick to graduate and go to college. Ma tells Shawn goodbye; she and Maverick are going to find out if King's son is actually Maverick's.

CHAPTER 2

The waiting room of the free clinic is busy on a Friday afternoon. As Maverick watches teenagers chase toddlers around, he explains that King sees a girl, Iesha, but they're not really together. About a year ago, when Maverick and Lisa were temporarily broken up, King suggested Maverick take his mind off things by having sex with Iesha. The condom broke—and now, Maverick is waiting for the DNA results on Iesha's three-month-old son. Ma is certain the baby is Maverick's, since they look alike, but Maverick isn't convinced.

Maverick seems to accept that he's never going to be as good at basketball as Lisa is—but he still doesn't want to look weak or inept in front of her. The aside that he's only messed up their relationship once has no other context—which, of course, begs the question of what Maverick did, and why it's weighing on him so heavily. As Maverick considers how Dre has changed since becoming a dad, he begins to see that fatherhood can force a person to totally reevaluate their priorities. Maverick seems to be disturbed that it makes Dre question his involvement in the gang—in Maverick's mind, this isn't even an option.



Lisa is college-bound, and she expects Maverick to go with her. It seems like a risky move to give Lisa this gift in front of Dre, as Maverick presumably got the money for the necklace by dealing hard drugs behind Dre's back. This could, perhaps, jeopardize his standing in the gang. Maverick's excuse, meanwhile, shows that he'd like to make a show of earning money honestly.



Especially given where Maverick and Ma are headed—to find out if Maverick has a son—it's significant that Ma assures him that she'll support him. In this way, she shows Maverick her unconditional love. But she's not the only one who's looking out for Maverick. Though Maverick makes it clear that he had to join the King Lords because of what Pops did in the past—meaning he may not actually want to be in the gang—Shawn seems willing to make sure Maverick stays safe.



The fact that Maverick and Ma are at the free clinic speaks to the economic standing of most of the clinic's patients. This is, perhaps, the only place they can afford to receive medical care. The background about how this baby was conceived explains what Maverick's big mistake was in his relationship with Lisa. And if this baby is indeed his, this could ruin his relationship with Lisa entirely.



Maverick's pager goes off: it's their neighbor, Mr. Wyatt, probably wanting Maverick to cut his grass. Ma thinks that Maverick makes all his money this way, but he makes way more selling drugs. Finally, Ilesha arrives at the clinic with her mother, Ms. Robinson, and King Jr. Ma snaps at Maverick to give Ilesha his seat and coos at King Jr. Ilesha sighs that the baby kept her up all night, and Ms. Robinson quips that Ilesha should be able to do better. Maverick notices how tired Ilesha looks and asks who's helping her. Ms. Robinson snaps that *she's* not going to help—if Ilesha wants to act like an adult, she can deal with the consequences. Maverick assures Ilesha that if the baby is his, he'll help.

Smirking, Ilesha asks how Lisa will feel about that. She insists that Lisa will break up with Maverick if the baby is his, since Lisa is a “bougie Catholic-school girl.” Ilesha insists that the baby is King's—and once they know for sure, she, King, and King Jr. will be a real family. The nurse calls for Ilesha, and Ilesha returns a moment later with an envelope. She hands it to Ms. Robinson, who opens it and then smugly tells Maverick that he's the dad. Ilesha looks distraught and snaps that she doesn't want to deal with Maverick. Maverick retorts that he doesn't want to deal with her either. King Jr. starts to fuss, and Ma picks him up. He needs a diaper change, so Ma grabs the diaper bag and tells Maverick to follow her. He needs to learn how to change his son's diaper.

Maverick balks at the door of the women's restroom, but Ma snaps that he has to get over his embarrassment until they start putting changing tables in men's restrooms. Ma gives Maverick King Jr. and digs through the diaper bag. She notes that there are a lot of clothes, lays out the pad, and tells Maverick to put King Jr. down. Looking at the baby's face, Maverick is suddenly overcome with fear, but he knows King Jr. needs him. Ma touches Maverick's shoulder, says it'll be okay, and walks him through changing a diaper. But when Ma and Maverick return to the waiting room, Ilesha and Ms. Robinson are gone—they left the car seat with the test results.

Maverick seems to desperately want Ma to believe that he's making money honestly. This is, presumably, why he continues to mow lawns at all—it gives him a convenient cover for his drug-dealing. Meanwhile, the way that Ms. Robinson talks to and about Ilesha contrasts greatly with how Ma speaks to Maverick. While Ma makes sure Maverick knows she's here for him, Ms. Robinson believes that Ilesha is on her own since having a baby. Not all of Maverick's friends and peers have the same kind of unconditional support he does.



Lisa is college-bound and goes to a private school, which suggests that her family is financially well-off. In this way, she seems to represent an entirely different way of life than Ilesha and many of Maverick's other friends. Given Lisa's trajectory, Ilesha implies, Lisa will never stay with Maverick if she learns that Maverick has a baby with someone else. The revelation that King Jr. is indeed Maverick's son turns both Ilesha and Maverick's lives upside down. Now, they have to accept the lifelong consequences of having sex once—they have to deal with each other, in some form, as long as they're parenting King Jr.



The fact that there aren't changing tables in the men's restroom shows that, as a dad, Maverick is going to have to face different challenges than a mother might. The world isn't set up to help him be a good dad—he doesn't even have a public space to change his baby. Regardless, Maverick already understands that King Jr. is at least half his responsibility. And taking on that responsibility doesn't seem quite so daunting with Ma's support—until, of course, he finds that he and Ma are on their own with the baby.



CHAPTER 3

Ma fusses all the way home about Iesha and Ms. Robinson. They stop at Ms. Robinson's house and bang on the doors, but no one answers. Ma says that they have to bring King Jr. home with them. At home, Maverick sets the car seat on the coffee table. Ma says that she hopes Iesha didn't abandon the baby, but she tells Maverick that he's a parent now. No matter what happens, he's responsible for *everything*. She notes that Iesha left enough formula and diapers for the weekend and says that she's going to try to borrow Dreanna's crib to set up in Maverick's room. Maverick protests that King Jr. is going to keep him awake, but Ma asks who else he's supposed to keep up.

Ma heads to the kitchen to make up a bottle, muttering about Maverick's nerve. Maverick decides he's going to call his son "Li'l Man," since "King Jr." doesn't feel right. Li'l Man reaches for Maverick's finger and pulls it to his mouth, so Maverick picks the baby up. When Li'l Man starts fussing, Ma returns to reposition the baby in Maverick's arms and hands Maverick the bottle. Maverick looks down at his son and feels his heart swell.

As Ma goes to wash Li'l Man's clothes, Maverick stares at his son. He's terrified and awestruck—and he realizes that he's not going to be able to go to the party tonight. Juggling Li'l Man, Maverick calls up Lisa and tells her that Ma wants him to stay home all weekend and take care of things around the house. It's not totally a lie. He tells Lisa not to bother coming over and says that he loves her.

When Li'l Man is halfway done with his bottle, Maverick puts him over his shoulder to burp him. Li'l Man hiccups and pukes. Ma smirks and reminds Maverick it's not about him anymore—and parenthood means that his clothes will never be clean. The doorbell rings, and Ma opens the door for Dre. Dre's eyes go wide when he sees Li'l Man and realizes the baby is Maverick's, but he laughs when Maverick complains that he already has puke on his shirt. He repositions the bottle in Maverick's hand and asks where Iesha went. Maverick explains that Iesha left while he and Ma changed Li'l Man's diaper. Dre sighs and offers Dreanna's old crib and stroller.

Ma is expressing some of the same sentiments as Ms. Robinson did: she wants Maverick to know that it's on him to deal with the consequences of fathering a child. But she's also going through the diaper bag to check on supply levels, and she takes the step of tracking down a crib. In this sense, Ma is firm about Maverick taking responsibility but also loving and supportive in a way that Ms. Robinson isn't. This situation is a lot for Maverick to take in, and he doesn't seem to have fully processed how much fatherhood is going to change his life.



Again, though Ma wants to make sure that Maverick knows Li'l Man is his responsibility, she's not going to leave him totally high and dry. Where Iesha seemed like she was totally on her own with figuring out how to properly hold and feed her baby, Maverick has Ma here to help point him in the right direction.



Maverick is already having to deal with the consequences of becoming a dad. First off, this means that he can't go to a party—something that now seems childish, if not impossible, with an infant to care for. This may help Maverick develop a better understanding of how Dre feels, since Dre has also stopped attending parties since becoming a dad.



Parenthood is clearly going to come with a lot of changes. In this case, Maverick is going to have to get used to the fact that being messy is a fact of life—that won't end until Li'l Man is past needing to be burped with every meal. To Dre, who's already dealt with a baby this age, Maverick's stress over all of this is endearing. But he also shows that, like Ma, he's here to help Maverick and teach him to be a good, caring dad. This is why he repositions the bottle for Maverick and offers the crib and stroller.



Ma leaves to pick up dinner, and once she's gone, Dre tells Maverick that fatherhood is a "trip." He can't imagine life without Adreanna, even though she's a wild three-year-old. He says he's going to miss her in the fall, when Keisha takes Adreanna back to Markham State with her two hours away. But next summer, Iesha will graduate, and then she and Dre will get married. He tells Maverick that it's okay to be afraid of being a father and admits he cried the first time he held Adreanna. He wants to be the father she deserves, so he decided to "man up." Now, he says, Maverick has to do the same thing.

Maverick insists that he's already a man, and Dre notes that Maverick *thinks* he's a man because he's selling drugs behind his and Shawn's backs. Maverick tries to deny it, but when Dre promises not to tell Shawn and insists that men tell the truth, Maverick admits that Dre is right. He insists, though, that it's just him and he needs the money. Dre says that Maverick needs to give it all up. Dre acknowledges that he deals, but he hates having to provide for Adreanna that way. He wants Maverick to do better and get a job at Wal-Mart, which would be "clean money."

Dre even suggests that Shawn could let Maverick out of the King Lords, but Maverick reminds Dre of what happened to Kenny. Kenny had gotten a football scholarship and wanted out—but the only way to get out is to "take the hit" for a crime or take a beating. The King Lords beat Kenny so badly that he couldn't play and lost the scholarship. Maverick says he doesn't want out. "Kinging" is in his blood, and he's not walking away from good money now that he has a kid. Dre threatens to tell Ma and Pops and rat King out—he knows King is involved. Maverick agrees to stop dealing and to talk to King, so Shawn won't have to.

CHAPTER 4

On Saturday night, Maverick finally reaches Iesha on the phone. She says she needs a break—she cries all the time and is in a "dark place." Maverick remembers that according to Ma, Keisha had postpartum depression after Adreanna was born. Iesha sounds like she's going through the same thing. She insists that she doesn't need a doctor and when Maverick asks how long of a break she needs, Iesha hangs up. When Maverick tells Ma, she says that they should plan on having Li'l Man for a while, and they might need to call Cousin Gary. Gary, who's an extended family member, is a lawyer who lives in the suburbs and looks down on the rest of the family who still live in the city.

Here, Dre talks a little about what being a father means to him. Though he doesn't say so outright, he implies that his priorities have shifted since her birth. Possibly, the King Lords aren't as important to him as they used to be, now that he has her to care for. Dre seems to want to inspire Maverick to be the father Li'l Man deserves—though it's also significant that Dre doesn't actually define what it means to "man up." Instead, he leaves that up to Maverick's interpretation.



Maverick clearly admires Dre and wants to please him, which is why he chooses to come clean and tell Dre the truth. However, Dre is arguably preying on Maverick's desire to be a man—if Dre says that a man does something, Maverick is going to agree. This helps him feel more mature, and it also helps him please Dre. Dre also introduces the idea that dealing drugs isn't the best way for Maverick to provide for his family—there's a "better" way to be a father.



The fact that Dre is even suggesting that Maverick get out of the King Lords implies that Dre himself might want out. But because he's so high up in the gang, it may be impossible for him to escape—but not so impossible for Maverick, who's still a lower-ranking "li'l homie." For Maverick, however, his life seems already set out for him: Pops was a King Lord, and Maverick knows he could be earning a lot of money by selling drugs. But ultimately, Maverick's desire to please Dre—and his parents—wins out.



Maverick is doing his best to be compassionate here. It sounds like Iesha is having a genuinely hard time, and he doesn't want to pressure her or make her feel even worse than she already does. But because Iesha won't communicate openly with Maverick, Maverick has no idea how long he's going to be a single dad to Li'l Man. When Iesha hangs up, Maverick's early plans to "help out" go out the window—now, it seems like all of the caregiving has become his responsibility.



Maverick tells himself all weekend that Iesha just needs a break. He hopes he's right, because taking care of Li'l Man overnight is hell. He's exhausted after two days. Now that it's Monday, Ma is going to work and leaving Maverick home alone with Li'l Man. Maverick is terrified. Ma puts her shopping list together for Maverick and reminds him to get Cajun spice so that her friend Moe can make them fish. She reminds him that Mrs. Wyatt next door or Granny will always help out, but Maverick insists that he's a man and doesn't need help. Ma kisses him and leaves.

Maverick checks on Li'l Man, who's fast asleep in his crib. The crib is in Maverick's bedroom, which means he had to move his CD collection and stereo onto the kitchen table. Maverick pages King so he can make sure King is feeling okay about the DNA test results. Then, he settles in for a nap. The phone rings just as Maverick starts to fall asleep. It's a call from Pops in prison, which is unusual—he never calls in the mornings. He asks about Ma, and when Maverick tells Pops that Moe convinced her to take weekends off, Pop says Moe's name in a weird tone. Pops has never met Moe; she and Ma became friends after Pops went to prison.

Pops asks how Maverick is. Last time they talked, Maverick assured him Li'l Man wasn't his—but now, he tells Pops that he's been taking care of his son. Pops is silent and then asks Maverick how he's doing. Maverick says it's a lot; he feels "ready to crack" after a weekend. Pops tells him he'll be okay and asks what the baby's name is. He insists King Jr. needs a new name that's more meaningful. Maverick's name, for instance, means "independent thinker," and his middle name is Malcolm after Malcolm X. Pops says that Li'l Man needs a name that'll tell him "who he is and who he can be." Maverick agrees. Before long, Pops's phone time is up.

The doorbell rings—it's King. King plops down on the couch to play video games and tells Maverick that he's already heard about Iesha. He's not upset about King Jr. and gets annoyed when Maverick apologizes for how the DNA test turned out. Maverick drops the subject and says he needs to talk to King about something else, but then Li'l Man starts crying. Maverick rushes to him and decides he needs a bottle. Li'l Man is so upset that Maverick can barely get the bottle in his mouth. Maverick sits down with Li'l Man next to King and explains that Iesha needed a break. King says that he used to help Iesha out with the baby; Maverick has to feed Li'l Man immediately when he wakes up, or he'll freak out.

As Ma prepares to leave, she makes it clear that Maverick has a lot of people around to help him, if he's willing to ask for it. She wants him to know that he's the primary caregiver for Li'l Man, but he's not alone. But to Maverick, being a man means facing his responsibilities on his own. He seems to think that asking for help would mean admitting weakness and inexperience.



Though Maverick has only had Li'l Man for a weekend, his life has already turned upside-down. Having to move his CDs and stereo to the kitchen is symbolic: it represents a shift from his carefree adolescence to his new reality of fatherhood. Taking care of Li'l Man, rather than listening to music and relaxing, has to be his priority now. Getting the unusual call from Pops shows Maverick that Ma was right: he has lots of people to who care about him, if only he's willing to reach out. The way that Pop responds to hearing about Moe suggests that there's a point of conflict in his and Moe's relationship, though the novel won't revisit this until much later.



Pops seems to take a similar view to Ma when it comes to facing challenges like Maverick having a baby. Notably, Pops asks how Maverick is doing, rather than how Li'l Man is doing, an indicator that Pops understands how difficult it can be to parent an infant. When Pops talks about why Maverick needs to rename King Jr., it shows that to Pops, at least, names have significance—it's important for a person to know "who he is and who he can be." In Maverick's case, Pops seemingly wanted him to know that he's an "independent thinker" who's strong, capable, and part of a long line of other strong people (like Malcolm X).



Though King says he's not at all bothered about the DNA test results, it's clear that King has spent a fair bit of time with Li'l Man, believing the baby was his son. Maverick seems to recognize that this could be a very emotional time for King, and he wants to be an understanding friend. But when King brushes Maverick off and insists it's no big deal, it opens up the possibility that King isn't willing to acknowledge his negative emotions. He, like Maverick, may associate manhood with hiding his feelings and dealing with things all on his own.



The boys sit in silence, and then King says that Li'l Man looks like Maverick. Maverick apologizes again when he sees the look in King's eyes. But King asks what Maverick needed to talk about. Maverick clears his throat and says he needs to give up dealing, since Dre figured out what they're up to. He explains that Dre is making him stop selling in exchange for not ratting King out to Shawn. King is disappointed that Maverick backed down, but Maverick insists that he was just looking out for King. He says that Dre threatened to tell Ma and Pops, and he suggests that King stop dealing, too. King refuses.

Maverick insists that he has to do what Dre said. He hands Li'l Man to King and gets up to dig his drug stash out from under the bathroom cabinet. He hands over the drugs to King, and King hands Li'l Man back and leaves, insisting that everything is fine even if Maverick is being ridiculous.

CHAPTER 5

Around noon, Dre stops by in his BMW to take Maverick and Li'l Man to the store. He helps Maverick strap in the car seat and puts on music, but Maverick is too exhausted to nod along to the beat. Maverick couldn't sleep because he was thinking about his conversation with King. He tells Dre that King stopped by and was upset, but he says King promised to stop dealing. Dre seems pleased and asks what else is going on.

When Maverick asks when Adreanna started to sleep well, Dre laughs and says it'll be bad for a while. He asks if Maverick has told Lisa yet, but Maverick hasn't, and he scoffs at the suggestion that Lisa will find out some other way if Maverick doesn't tell her. Maverick knows Lisa will be hurt and says he doesn't want to break her heart, but Dre encourages him to tell Lisa soon. They discuss Dre's upcoming wedding, and then Tupac comes on the radio. Maverick tells Dre his theory: Tupac is actually alive and will return in 2003 after faking his death for seven years. Tupac is obsessed with the number seven because it's supposed to be holy. Dre says that sounds interesting, but only cowards fake their deaths, and Tupac wasn't a coward.

Here, the look that Maverick notices in King's eye further suggests that King is struggling emotionally with the fact that Li'l Man isn't his son, but he just doesn't want to talk about it. As he and Maverick move on to discuss their drug operation, King expects Maverick to behave a certain way—and to stand up for himself, not just back down from the “big homies.” But Maverick makes it clear that he has his parents to think about, and he doesn't want to lose their approval.



King might insist everything is fine, but again, he seems to be upset with how everything is playing out. Not only is King Jr. not his baby—his friend is backing out of their operation for reasons that King doesn't understand.



This passage makes it clear how exhausting it is to be a parent—and it shows how Lesha may have gotten to the point that she was willing to abandon Li'l Man. When Dre takes Maverick at his word that King agreed to stop dealing, it shows how much he trusts Maverick. But this is, of course, a lie—King has no intention to stop selling—and so it may come back to bite Maverick later.



At this point, all the other aspects of having a baby don't seem nearly as important to Maverick as his sleep. To Dre, who's been a parent longer, this is funny—but he does assure Maverick that the sleeplessness will get better. Though Maverick scoffs at the suggestion that Lisa will find out about Li'l Man somehow, Maverick, Dre, and Li'l Man are on the way to the grocery store. They could run into other people they know in public, and those people might then tell Lisa. It seems likely, then, that Maverick still wants to think of himself as being in control of his life and particularly his relationship, even in the face of evidence that he's not.



Dre pulls into Wyatt's Grocery, the Garden's oldest grocery store. Mr. Wyatt and Mrs. Wyatt are at the register, and Mrs. Wyatt immediately starts fussing over Li'l Man. She and Mr. Wyatt used to foster children, so she loves babies. She reminds Maverick that she's around if he needs anything. Mr. Wyatt comes over, confirms that Maverick isn't making Ma take care of Li'l Man, and reminds Maverick to apply himself to school. Though Mr. Wyatt gets on Maverick's nerves, he knows the old man cares. When the feds came to arrest Pops, Mr. Wyatt looked after Maverick until they released Ma after questioning her.

Mr. Wyatt tells Maverick he needs to support his son and asks what he's going to do for work. Dre says that Maverick is looking, and Mr. Wyatt says that his nephew Jamal is cutting his hours to attend community college, and so he needs someone to take a part-time gig. Maverick insists that it won't pay enough, but Dre says Maverick will take it. Mrs. Wyatt offers to take Li'l Man during the day, but Maverick refuses again.

Dre repeats that Maverick will take the job, but Mr. Wyatt stares at Maverick and asks if he wants the job. Maverick doesn't, but he knows Ma needs help with the bills, so he says he'll take it. Mr. Wyatt says that Maverick will start on the first day of school and will work some in the store, some in his garden. He adds that he doesn't tolerate "gang drama."

Annoyed, Maverick agrees to leave Li'l Man with Mrs. Wyatt and grabs a cart. Once he and Dre are out of the Wyatts' hearing, Maverick hisses that this is awful. Dre insists that Mr. Wyatt is cool, and it could be worse—Maverick could be working for Mr. Lewis, the cranky barber next door. He also reminds Maverick that he has to man up.

Maverick gets everything on Ma's list, which uses up all of his money. As he, Dre, and Li'l Man leave the store, they run into Ms. Rosalie and Tammy, Lisa's best friend. Maverick realizes Dre is right: he has to tell Lisa before someone else does. Tammy's eyes are huge, and she asks who the baby belongs to. She seems to know the baby is Maverick's. Maverick knows he has to talk to Lisa now.

Mrs. Wyatt, like Ma and like Dre, want Maverick to know and to trust that if he needs help, the community will be there to help him with Li'l Man. Mr. Wyatt offers his support in a different way, by making sure that Maverick is taking responsibility for his son and not forcing Ma to do all the hard, sleepless work of caring for an infant. Maverick understands that Mr. Wyatt does this out of care, which shows that Maverick is able to recognize and appreciate people's intentions, even if their actions annoy him.



Maverick implies at various points throughout the novel that dealing drugs is lucrative, making any other job seem ridiculously low-paying in comparison. But it's significant that Dre pushes Maverick so hard to take this job with Mr. Wyatt. It shows that Dre is taking his role as Maverick's mentor seriously—and he wants Maverick to earn "clean money" to support his son.



Though Maverick has many reservations, he also feels immensely loyal to his family. So, in the end, he takes the job because he can't bear the thought of Ma trying to support the family on her own. This, he's beginning to realize, is what Dre means by "man[ning] up."



Given Maverick's suspicions that Dre would ideally like to leave the King Lords, it's possible that Dre pushes Maverick so hard to take this job because it's what he'd rather be doing. He also sees it as the best way to care for a child—something he wants to impress on Maverick.



Acknowledging that Dre was right shows that Maverick is becoming more willing to accept that he doesn't know everything. And when he realizes he has to talk to Lisa right away, he demonstrates that he's learning the importance of doing the things that are difficult but are ultimately for the best.



CHAPTER 6

Dre drops Maverick off at Lisa's house and agrees to take Li'l Man for a drive to help him nap. Lisa's momma's car isn't in the drive, but Carlos's is. Carlos answers the door and refuses to let Maverick in, but Lisa appears, snaps at Carlos to mind his own business, and drags Maverick to her room. She kisses him, and Maverick kisses her back until he remembers Tammy's face—but he's not ready to talk yet. Instead, he lies with Lisa on her bed and listens to her talk about how busy her schedule is going to be this year with basketball, the school paper, and the yearbook committee. She wants to look good on college applications and get out of Garden Heights.

Lisa suggests that Maverick join some clubs at his school, but Maverick says that college might not be for him. He sits up, imagining Lisa going to college, becoming a pediatrician, and marrying a rich guy. She asks what's wrong. Maverick stands and assures Lisa that he loves her and "wasn't thinking that way." He says that when they were broken up last year, he had sex with Iesha once. Lisa already looks distraught and pulls away. She asks why Maverick is telling her now. Maverick says that Iesha had a baby, and they just had a DNA test done—the baby is his.

Lisa sinks to the floor and accuses Maverick of lying to her—she's been asking for weeks what's wrong, and he's been keeping the DNA test a secret. This explains why Iesha keeps laughing whenever Lisa and Tammy see her. Maverick insists that he didn't try to trick Lisa, but Lisa says that Carlos and her mom are right about Maverick. Her eyes fill with tears, and she tells Maverick to leave. Carlos rushes in and orders Maverick to leave as well, but Lisa tells Carlos that Maverick isn't worth it. This hits Maverick like a gunshot. He leaves.

Hanging out with Lisa and not having Li'l Man to worry about offers Maverick a much-needed escape. And Dre, by taking Li'l Man for the drive to help him nap, demonstrates that he's going to be around to help Maverick—both the baby and with more general problems. Hearing Lisa talk about her classes and extracurriculars, Maverick can pretend he's just a normal high school student again—not a father, and not someone who's about to break Lisa's heart.



Lisa seems to believe that if Maverick were willing to try, he could break out of his difficult circumstances, attend college, and make a more secure life for himself. But college takes money—money that Maverick doesn't have, especially not now that he has a baby to care for. In general, though, telling Lisa the truth shows that Maverick is growing up and taking responsibility for his actions.



Lisa makes it seem like everyone in the neighborhood has known about Maverick, Iesha, and Li'l Man aside from her. This suggests that in some ways, Lisa isn't as connected to the Garden Heights community as Maverick is—perhaps because she's college-bound, which seems somewhat unusual for the neighborhood. This may be another aspect of why it's difficult for Maverick and Dre to leave the King Lords: choosing a different path from others in the neighborhood could socially isolate him.



CHAPTER 7

Lisa refuses to speak to Maverick and blocks his number. After two weeks, Maverick finds himself listening to sad R&B music. Lisa was his best friend, and he can't bear the thought of living without her. Ma tells Maverick he has to deal with the consequences. Everything is difficult, since Iesha still hasn't come to get Li'l Man yet; Maverick is exhausted, and Li'l Man is expensive. Ma even asked for an extension on the electricity bill so they could buy a changing table, and she's considering taking weekend shifts at her hotel job. Dre helps out by buying baby clothes and stopping by to watch Li'l Man so that Maverick can nap.

With Lisa gone, Maverick's life has turned upside down. When Ma insists that Maverick has to deal with the consequences, it shows that she's using these circumstances to teach him to take responsibility and behave in a more mature way. But despite this, Ma is also sacrificing to buy things for Li'l Man (sacrificing the electricity bill for a changing table, for instance), and Dre is also helping out financially. Maverick might have to deal with the emotional aspects of fatherhood alone, but his family is rallying around him to help him with the financial ones.



Maverick hopes the job with Mr. Wyatt will help his situation. Tomorrow is his first day of school and work; he's not excited about work, but he hasn't been this excited about school since he was little. He'll get to be with his friends Rico and Junie, but not King—King got expelled last year. Maverick should be resting up, but instead, Li'l Man wakes up screaming in the middle of the night. Maverick can't figure out what's wrong, so he wakes Ma up for help. Ma thinks Li'l Man is teething, and she tells Maverick that there are teething rings in the freezer. She gives Maverick a death stare when he says he needs to sleep for school tomorrow.

Maverick fetches the teething ring and tries to give it to Li'l Man, but he won't take it. He keeps screaming louder and louder. Maverick feels ready to snap. He sets Li'l Man in his crib and walks out the front door. On the porch steps, he sits with his head in his hands. He doesn't want to be needed so much, and he feels like a failure. Eventually, Ma comes out and tells Maverick that she settled Li'l Man. She assures him parenting is hard for everyone and tells him to get some sleep.

Maverick drags himself out of bed hours later. Li'l Man is still asleep, so Maverick irons his clothes and eats breakfast. In the kitchen, Ma tells him to stay focused and to be on time for work. She asks if he packed enough for Mrs. Wyatt, who's going to watch Li'l Man for the day, and tells Maverick to try to talk to Iesha at school. Maverick apologizes for last night, but Ma just says that now he knows how Iesha felt.

Ma says that Maverick and Iesha also need to discuss a new name for the baby. Maverick says he has an idea, but Ma will think it's stupid. He tells her he wants to name the baby Seven, which is the number of perfection, and his middle name will be Maverick, so that he can be the best version of Maverick. Ma says it's not stupid, but he still needs to talk to Iesha.

Li'l Man starts to cry, so Maverick goes to get him up. A horrific stench greets him, and he calls for Ma, but she insists Maverick can handle it. As soon as Maverick lifts Li'l Man, poop streams out of his diaper all over Maverick's clothes. Quickly, Maverick cleans up his son and throws on wrinkled clothes off the floor. He tucks Li'l Man into his carrier and runs next door to Mrs. Wyatt. Mrs. Wyatt laughs, takes the carrier, and sends Maverick to school. She assures him that Li'l Man will be fine, but Maverick hopes his son doesn't think he's abandoning him like Iesha did.

School seems like the one place where Maverick is going to be able to escape full-time, single parenthood. At school, Maverick is still just a kid, and that's an extremely attractive prospect for him. Ma's death stare when Maverick mentions needing to sleep shows that she wants to impress upon him that though he is a kid, he's also a parent. She may have done the work of putting the teething rings in the freezer, but Maverick also needs to utilize the help.



Growing teeth is a painful process, which is why Li'l Man is so upset in this moment. And Maverick might be sympathetic to Li'l Man's plight, but it's still difficult for him to hear his son crying in pain and seeming unwilling to accept help. Parenting, this passage shows, can be overwhelming, and everyone needs help at times. This is ultimately why Ma steps in: she wants Maverick to be self-sufficient, but she also isn't going to abandon him.



Ma wants to use Maverick and Li'l Man's breakdown last night as a teaching moment so Maverick can develop some empathy. Iesha, Ma implies, has been dealing with a screaming baby who won't sleep for months—so it's no wonder she needed a break. But again, Ma isn't going to totally abandon Maverick, which is why she's asking if he packed enough for Mrs. Wyatt.



As Maverick explains his reasoning for Li'l Man's new name, it shows that he's taking Pops's advice to heart. Li'l Man's new name is going to tell him who he is: a perfect, independent thinker who, Maverick hopes, can do better than Maverick has done.



Dealing with this mess just after dealing with a night of teething shows Maverick that school isn't necessarily going to let him escape parenthood. Having to wear wrinkled clothes to school drives home that no matter what Maverick does or where he goes, he's still a stressed-out parent—and he's going to look like one, no matter how hard he tries not to.



As soon as Maverick is around the corner, he feels free. He stops in to say hi to Dre, who's out washing his car. Dre objects to Maverick's clothing choices, but Maverick explains that Li'l Man pooped on him. Dre howls with laughter, but then Maverick admits that he walked out on Li'l Man last night. He says he went back, and Dre says that's what matters. Before Maverick leaves, Dre gives him his watch—it used to be their granddaddy's. Dre tells Maverick to bring it back tomorrow and focus on his grades.

Garden High is actually Jefferson Davis High School, but nobody calls it that. Maverick looked up Jefferson Davis and believes that whoever named the school was trying to insult the mostly Black student body, since Jefferson Davis was the president of the Confederacy. Maverick enters the building and reminds himself that his goal is to graduate. He notices a Garden Disciple named Ant giving him dirty looks. As Ant passes, he tells Maverick to tell Dre to watch his back. Then, Junie and Rico appear out of nowhere. Since Ant is outnumbered, he says again that Dre needs to watch his back, and then he walks away.

Rico and Junie say that the GDs have been at it recently, and they mention that something happened last weekend. Since they're at school, they can't tell Maverick what they're talking about, but they assure him that the "big homies" aren't upset that Maverick is stuck at home. They ask how being a dad is, and Junie is shocked to hear that babies can poop on you. Rico studies Maverick's outfit and says that his Jordans (Air Jordan sneakers) are fake—they have cracks. Rico and Junie howl with laughter, but Maverick is incensed. Now he has to go get his video games back from Red, the local hustler who sells stuff out of his trunk and who got him the Jordans.

The bell rings. It feels good to be back with friends, joking about having cranky old Mr. Phillips for History. Maverick follows Junie to Mr. Phillips' class. There, he spots Iesha's best friend, Lala, and asks her if Iesha is at school. Mr. Phillips tells Maverick to sit down. By midday, Maverick is exhausted; he naps in the library during his free period and then heads for Spanish. Before he gets there, though, King pages him that he's outside. It used to be their tradition to skip some of the first day, and King must want to continue with it. Maverick saunters past the secretary and the security guard, but the guard starts to follow him. Maverick races to the parking lot and leaps into King's car, and they race out just in time.

Again, Dre wants to make sure Maverick feels supported. He shows here that Maverick doesn't have to go through parenting alone—he had Ma to help him last night, and now, he has Dre to validate that difficult experiences are normal. Letting Maverick borrow their granddaddy's watch, meanwhile, allows Dre to show Maverick that he trusts him to be mature and careful.



Jefferson Davis was the president of the Confederacy during the U.S. Civil War, and one of the main motivations behind this conflict was that many Southern landowners wanted to continue enslaving Black people. The aside about naming the high school after Davis, then, reminds readers that the novel's Black characters are living in an environment that disrespects and perhaps even actively discriminates against them. It also suggests that Garden Heights itself doesn't value its Black residents—if it did, perhaps the school wouldn't have this name. Meanwhile, Junie and Rico's sudden appearance reminds Maverick that because of the gang, he has friends who will always be around for him.



Maverick starts to sense a divide growing between himself and his friends. Because Maverick is a father now, while Rico and Junie are still normal 17-year-olds, they're starting to have different priorities—but Maverick still wants to be a part of Junie and Rico's world. This is what makes the discovery that his Jordans are fakes even worse—Maverick is trying, and failing, to fit in with his peers.



Maverick's first day at school impresses upon him that caring for Seven is going to make keeping up with school extremely difficult. Skipping school to hang out with King does two things. First, it shows how loyal Maverick and King still are to each other, since they're continuing this tradition. But it also shows that Maverick isn't taking school especially seriously. If an opportunity to have fun presents itself, Maverick is going to take it without any thought for the potential consequences.



CHAPTER 8

King is a legend at Garden High, but he's no longer allowed on the grounds. He used to be on the football team, but the coach was racist and a "redneck." When the coach told King to wash his car and implied that King was his slave, King beat him up. That coach never came back. Presently, King laughs as he and Maverick drive. King insists that they need to go to the mall like they usually do, but Maverick says he really just needs a nap before he goes to work for Mr. Wyatt. King is incredulous that Maverick gave up dealing to earn pennies from Mr. Wyatt, and he also dislikes Mr. Wyatt—the Wyatts were King's last foster family.

Maverick says he has to provide for Li'l Man somehow and the conversation stops. King answers Maverick's questions with one-word answers. Maverick apologizes again for how things turned out with Li'l Man, but King insists that it's fine. He asks how Li'l Man is doing and thinks it's weird that Maverick is trying to rename the baby. Their conversation ends when King gets a page from a buyer who goes to Saint Mary's Catholic School, which is where Lisa goes. Maverick knows he has to try to talk to her.

In the parking lot, Maverick assures King that he'll be quick. King points to Lisa across the parking lot: she's leaning against a car and giggling with a white boy. Incensed, Maverick storms over and says that they need to talk. The white boy asks if this is the "asshole" who had a baby with someone else, making Maverick even angrier. Lisa assures the boy, Connor, that she can handle Maverick. Once Connor backs away, Lisa tells Maverick to go home. He apologizes again and asks to fix it, but Lisa refuses. A security guard approaches and tells Maverick to get off the school property, so Maverick leaves.

King drives Maverick back to the Garden. Maverick mopes about Lisa, and King insists he can't let a girl get to him like this. As they pass the shopping center, Maverick catches sight of Red selling out of his Impala's trunk. He tells King about the fake sneakers, and King turns around immediately. Maverick approaches Red and says—in front of a woman checking out Red's goods—that Red sold him fake sneakers. The woman leaves right away.

Here, the novel confirms that the high school in Garden Heights is racist and exclusionary to its Black students. Hiring a racist coach shows that they value the staff over the safety and emotional well-being of their Black students. King, then, becomes a legend among the student body because he's willing to stand up for himself and Black kids like him—even if it means he can't go back to school. King also shows here that for him, making good money is more important than where that money comes from.



King's comment about renaming Li'l Man hints that he's at least a little bit upset about not being King Jr.'s biological father. Maverick, meanwhile, sees it as his fatherly duty to take a job that King sees as beneath him, which drives home how different Maverick and King are. Though they both prioritize making money, they have different concerns: King wants to make as much money as possible, even if he has to use illegal means. Maverick, on the other hand, seems to want to set a good example for Li'l Man by working a legitimate job.



Maverick's choice to continue trying to talk to Lisa read as somewhat entitled. He seems to believe that Lisa owes him the privilege of a second chance—when that's not at all the case. It also becomes clear here that Lisa has a life of her own at school, with friends whom Maverick finds abhorrent. Though Ilesha referring to Lisa earlier as a "bougie Catholic-school girl" was intended as an insult, Ilesha may have been right to imply that Lisa is fundamentally different from Maverick.



King's advice to stop worrying about girls in general suggests that King sees friendships between men as more meaningful than romantic relationships. Despite the tension between King and Maverick right now, King is still loyal to his friend. It's important to make sure that Maverick is able to get back at Red for selling him the fake sneakers—this is, in King's understanding, what friends do for one another.



Maverick says that he needs his games back, but Red reminds him that trades are final, and the games are gone. Maverick asks for the money instead. King walks up behind Maverick and says that they should respect Red's policy, but that Red shouldn't be able to make money. King and Maverick flip Red's tables over, sending his merchandise crashing to the ground.

Again, King demonstrates his loyalty to Maverick here by flipping over Red's tables, thereby taking revenge on the hustler. This makes Maverick feel secure in his friendship: it shows him he'll always have King to rely on, even if their relationship is strained.



Maverick and King then head to King's apartment, where Maverick takes a nap. This makes him 15 minutes late for work. King drops Maverick off at Mr. Wyatt's house, and Maverick lets himself into the backyard. The yard is a garden with flowers, bird feeders, and fruits and vegetables; it's shocking that something this beautiful exists in the neighborhood. Maverick approaches Mrs. Wyatt and Li'l Man and greets his drooling son. When Mr. Wyatt clears his throat, Mrs. Wyatt takes Li'l Man inside for a nap.

Allowing Maverick to nap instead of going to the mall shows that King is trying to be understanding of Maverick's new life as a father. Noting that Mr. Wyatt's beautiful garden is an oddity in the neighborhood suggests that few people in Garden Heights take the time to beautify their homes. They likely have other concerns, like simply earning enough money to survive.



Alone with Mr. Wyatt, Maverick explains that he had to stay late for school. Mr. Wyatt calls Maverick on the lie and says he knows what King is up to: gang stuff. Maverick backpedals and assures Mr. Wyatt that they were just hanging out. Mr. Wyatt accepts this, but he tells Maverick this is his first strike—he can't show up late and lie on his first day of work. He insists that Maverick stay an extra hour without the extra pay. Maverick wants to curse, but Mr. Wyatt insists that life isn't fair, and he reminds Maverick that he can always quit. Maverick wants to, but he remembers the electricity bill and Li'l Man. Mr. Wyatt says that today, they're planting **roses**.

Though Maverick finds Mr. Wyatt's insistence on punctuality and honesty annoying, he recognizes that he doesn't have much choice here. If he's going to make Dre proud, help Ma, and support Seven, he has to put up with Mr. Wyatt. The fact that Maverick lies about being at school, though, shows that he understands what Mr. Wyatt wants to hear. He understands, in other words, what responsibility and maturity look like, and he wants to look like he's pursuing that path.



Maverick spends all afternoon digging up a plot for the roses and adding bagged soil; he's still working when the sun goes down. Everything smells fresh. Finally, it's time to plant the **rosebushes**. Maverick thinks the roses look like twigs, not bushes, and notes that the plot seems awfully big for something that isn't food. Mr. Wyatt says that flowers remind him that beauty can come from almost nothing, and he tells Maverick that the roses will be fine through the winter. They'll grow some roots and go dormant, though Mr. Wyatt has had roses bloom in an ice storm before.

The bareroot roses don't look like much to Maverick, but Mr. Wyatt encourages Maverick to understand that beautiful, meaningful things can come from even the unlikeliest of circumstances. This begins to symbolically associate the roses with Maverick himself. Right now, Maverick doesn't have high self-worth—but given the way that Mr. Wyatt talks about the roses, Maverick has the potential to bloom and thrive if he puts his mind to it.



Mr. Wyatt says that **roses** are amazing, and that they can take more than people think. They'll have to prune them, which means they'll cut away what the bush doesn't need and won't help it grow. Mr. Wyatt plants two rosebushes himself and recites some scripture—he's a deacon at the Christ Temple Church. Then, he tells Maverick to plant the rest of the roses, so Maverick sets right to work. Mr. Wyatt says he thought Maverick would get upset about getting his clothes dirty, but Maverick explains that Li'l Man already pooped on him today.

Saying that it's essential to remove anything that doesn't help the roses grow asks readers to consider what Maverick (whom the roses symbolize) might need to cut out of his own life. It implies that Maverick is going to have to leave some things behind if he wants to thrive. Maverick is already becoming more easygoing, as evidenced by his lack of concern about getting dirty.



With a laugh, Mr. Wyatt says that Maverick had a tough morning. Maverick replies that it's been a tough day, and Mr. Wyatt asks if he wants to talk about it. No one has asked Maverick that before. Maverick says he's alright, but then he tells Mr. Wyatt that Lisa refused to give him another chance. Mr. Wyatt notes that this is a lot to ask of her, and he asks if Maverick has considered how Lisa feels. He asks how Maverick would feel if Lisa had had a baby with someone else. Maverick knows he'd be upset, just like Lisa is now. Noticing Maverick's silence, Mr. Wyatt advises him to let Lisa go, and he leaves Maverick to finish the **roses**. Maverick plants one twig, thinking that it deserves a chance—unlike him.

When Maverick reflects that nobody has asked him if he'd like to talk about what's going on in his life, it suggests that he might not be getting the emotional support he really needs. He's getting practical support from Ma and Dre, but neither of them has actually sat down with Maverick and asked him how he's feeling about things. By asking this question, Mr. Wyatt steps into a fatherly role and helps Maverick develop some empathy for Lisa. It's important, he suggests, to consider how one's actions make others feel, and to be respectful of people's wishes.



CHAPTER 9

Maverick has been working for Mr. Wyatt for a month now. Working in the store is easy, but the garden is so much work, and the pay is a joke—Maverick only makes enough to cover the electricity bill and buy diapers and formula. But he likes working in the garden. Plants are “a trip:” one day they're fine, the next they're half dead. They're like girls, or babies: taking care of a baby is all about survival, and it's the same with plants. Maverick's job is just to get the plants and Seven what they need to survive.

Maverick finds that gardening teaches him important lessons about the rest of his life. In particular, he's beginning to realize that when it comes to parenting an infant, basic survival is the most important thing to focus on. Rather than trying to be a perfect father, Maverick simply has to work hard and provide for his son.



Maverick has decided that his son's name is Seven, though he hasn't spoken to Iesha. Two weeks ago, he learned that she moved out of Ms. Robinson's house, and he hasn't been able to track her down. Ma wants Maverick to talk to Cousin Gary, but Maverick knows he and Iesha can figure it out. They have to; he can't handle this much longer. Some days, he drops Seven off with Mrs. Wyatt and goes home to sleep until work. His grades are going to be awful, but he doesn't care. Now, it's a Friday night, and Maverick is doing laundry instead of homework while Seven sits in a bouncer nearby. Ma has taken on extra shifts at the hotel.

Maverick is only barely surviving as he takes care of Seven: he's not able to focus on school, and he desperately needs more support. This is made even clearer by the aside that Maverick is doing laundry instead of homework—caring for Seven and doing household chores take priority now. However, since Ma seems to suggest that talking to Cousin Gary will get Maverick some of the legal support he needs, it's unclear why Maverick doesn't want to reach out to him.



The phone rings—it's King. King asks Maverick if he's going out tonight, but Maverick says he's doing laundry. King invites him to join him, Junie, and Rico anyway. Maverick misses his friends, but he explains that Ma is at work, and he can't pay for a babysitter. King says that Dre is the one keeping Maverick poor, and he hangs up before Maverick can defend himself. Maverick puts his head in his hands; he'd do anything to go out with his friends.

It's hard for King to understand why Maverick is making the choice to prioritize Seven over his social life. This begins to drive a wedge between the boys' friendship, as Maverick finds himself caught between his friend and his cousin. Maverick might recognize that following Dre's advice is keeping him poor—but he also knows that Dre has his reasons for wanting Maverick to make “clean money” instead of drug money.



Seven watches Maverick with concern, so Maverick tells him it's okay and lays him on a blanket. They play on the floor for a bit. Maverick recently sent pictures of Seven to Pops, but he hasn't been able to take Seven to meet him yet. When Seven starts to rub his eyes, Maverick picks him up, dresses him for bed, and gives him a pacifier. He leaves Seven to fall asleep on his own while he showers, but when he gets out, Seven is still staring at his mobile. Sighing, Maverick returns to laundry and homework and wishes that he and Lisa could hang out.

Maverick and Seven's relationship is deepening, as evidenced here by Seven's look of concern. Seven is starting to rely more and more on Maverick, both out of necessity and because he's likely beginning to trust and bond with his father. Maverick also shows that he's becoming a more attentive father here, as he pays attention to Seven's signals that he's ready to go to bed. Maverick is not only becoming a better dad—he's becoming more mature and self-sacrificial.



Suddenly, the doorbell rings. Afraid it will wake Seven, Maverick peeks outside and sees Dre's car—but not Dre. When he steps outside, he finds a full Super Soaker on the porch. As soon as Maverick picks it up, Dre leaps out of his hiding place and shoots Maverick in the face with water. They shoot each other until Maverick douses Dre with the hose. Dre picks his watch up out of the grass and notes that it got scratched. He explains he wants to hang out with Maverick; he got pizza and the new Lawless CD, which doesn't officially come out until next week. Lawless is a GD, but he's a fantastic rapper, so no one messes with him.

Maverick's priorities are definitely shifting, as his first fear is that the doorbell is going to wake up Seven. But Dre and Maverick nevertheless have a water gun fight, which drives home that both of these characters are still young and need to act like kids sometimes to unwind. Dre's choice to hang out with Maverick even though they can't go out suggests that he recognizes Maverick needs support right now, as he's still adjusting to fatherhood.



Maverick would rather eat pizza and listen to Lawless than sort laundry and write a history report, so he grabs the baby monitor and hops into Dre's BMW. He's disgusted when he sees that Dre got Hawaiian pizza; pizza shouldn't have pineapple on it. Dre likes weird food, though. Maverick moans about losing Lisa and says that his life sucks now: his friends don't want to hang out with a baby, and he's exhausted. He doesn't feel like him anymore. Suddenly, a loud shout interrupts the conversation—it's Bus Stop Tony, a local "crackhead." When Tony notices the pizza, Dre asks if Tony has eaten today and gives him the rest.

Again, Maverick is still a kid, which means that he still has a tendency to abandon his responsibilities in order to have fun. In this passage, Dre shows how kind and understanding he is to everyone. He's willing to listen to Maverick talk about how much his life has changed, and he also takes a genuine interest in the health and well-being of others in the community, like Tony.



Seven's cries come over the baby monitor, so Maverick invites Dre inside to play video games. Dre says he'll be a minute; he needs to call Keisha and say goodnight. While Dre is on the phone, Maverick shouts that Dre is "whipped" so Keisha can hear. Inside, Maverick discovers that Seven has a dirty diaper. He's discovered the secret to changing diapers is to distract Seven, so he starts to rap. As Maverick puts Seven back in his crib, he hears two gunshots outside. They're too close. Maverick rushes outside, and he hears screeching tires. When he gets to Dre's car, Dre doesn't answer—there's a bloody hole in his head. Maverick drags Dre out of the car and shouts for help.

Both Maverick and Dre show here that they're loyal to their families: plans of sitting in the car and hanging out have to change to accommodate Seven. And though Dre is willing to go along with this change in plans, he also needs to check in on his own family. But when Dre is shot, it drives home that life in Garden Heights isn't safe, especially for someone in a gang. Being a part of a gang means that a person might die at any moment—rendering them unable to care for their family.



CHAPTER 10

Dre died a week ago. When he was shot, the Wyatts were the first to come help Maverick: Mr. Wyatt tried to get Maverick to let Dre go, but Maverick wouldn't. He cursed at the paramedics for not trying to save Dre—they just put a white sheet over him. The police questioned Tony and Keisha; over the phone, Keisha heard someone tell Dre to hand over his valuables before he was shot. The police think it was a random burglary, but Maverick knows it was a GD, probably Ant. Ant has a target on his back now—Maverick can't let this slide. Dre was family.

Ma lets Maverick take a week off of school, and Mr. Wyatt tells him to take as long as he needs. It doesn't seem like there's a point to doing anything anymore. Pops told Maverick that grief is something everyone has to carry, and that makes sense now. Maverick feels like he has a boulder on his back, and only crying will make the pain stop. But men aren't supposed to cry—they're supposed to support everyone else, especially when everyone else is already crying. So Maverick throws himself into caring for Adreanna, Keisha, Ma, and Dre's parents.

Maverick has to be strong today at Dre's funeral. Mrs. Wyatt is taking care of Seven, so Maverick gets dressed in peace. Ma comes in and asks to help Maverick with his tie. She jokes about not changing Seven's diapers—grandmas spoil kids, not clean up after them. Granny bought baby Maverick lots of clothes, so Ma's little "Stinka Butt" always looked great. Maverick groans at the nickname, but Ma starts to cry. She says she could be burying Maverick today, and all she does is worry about him. Maverick assures her that he's fine and says they should get going.

Maverick is barely present for the funeral and only remembers some of it. All the King Lords stand at the back, and Shawn speaks first. After that, Maverick just remembers lowering the coffin into the ground. Now, he's in the church basement for the repast. Granny fixed Maverick a plate, but he just pushes his potatoes around. Ma and Moe hold hands as they talk to some of Ma's cousins, while Adreanna laughs. She doesn't seem to understand she's at her daddy's funeral. Maverick puts his head down but picks it up when Moe comes over to join him. She asks if he's okay and offers to cover for him if he wants to leave early. Maverick thanks her and steps outside.

Here, Maverick confirms that gang affiliation puts people in danger—he and the King Lords are always at risk of violence from the rival Garden Disciples. But when Maverick says that he can't let this slide because Dre was family, it suggests that he's actually more loyal to his family than he is to the gang. The two may be intertwined, but Maverick can't let this go because Dre was his cousin.



It's important to note that Maverick is struggling with his grief. He's feeling intense, difficult emotions, and he knows that crying will help him cope. But this knowledge doesn't seem to line up with what he believes about manhood. Grown men, in Maverick's understanding, aren't emotional—they need to help other people heal, rather than acknowledging that they might need support too.



When Ma helps Maverick with his tie, it shows Maverick again that his mother is always going to be here for him. No matter how old he gets, he's always going to be able to rely on her. But for Ma, Maverick's gang affiliation poses problems: he may be a King Lord for his own protection, but Dre's death has reminded Ma that being part of a gang is fundamentally dangerous. She always has to fear for her son's life.



Maverick can't mentally process the funeral, which is a mark of how traumatized he is. Trying not to focus on the proceedings is a way to emotionally protect himself. And although the funeral is supposed to bring Maverick together with his family, it's significant that Maverick seems to be going through this in his own world. This may be because he doesn't want to let himself feel his emotions, so it's harder to connect with the rest of his grieving family.



It's a beautiful day, too beautiful for a funeral. "Big homies" stand around Shawn's car in the parking lot; they financed the funeral and have been around all week. Maverick feels good that he's a part of things now. Shawn is on the hood of his car with a bottle of bourbon. He holds it out to Maverick, who pours a little out for Dre and then takes a sip. P-Nut says the service was beautiful with its "introspectalness." Maverick rolls his eyes, and Shawn promises to avenge Dre's death. He's not sure who did it yet, aside from knowing it was a GD, so Maverick tells him about Ant. Shawn promises to look into it and then handle it. But Maverick insists that *he* needs to handle it—Dre was his cousin. Shawn says Maverick has to comply.

The other "big homies" smirk. Maverick asks if Shawn thinks he can't do it, so Shawn pulls down his sunglasses to reveal the two teardrop tattoos for the two people he's killed. He asks if Maverick has ever shot anyone. Maverick hasn't, and he admits he doesn't have a gun. Maverick storms back to the church, feeling like a little kid who will never live up to Pops's name. He almost runs into Lisa; he's shocked to see her. She asks if he's okay and seems to know he's not, so she leads him away to walk around the neighborhood.

CHAPTER 11

Maverick and Lisa walk silently around the neighborhood until they get to Lisa's house. Inside, they reminisce about Dre. Lisa asks if it's true that Maverick found Dre and offers her condolences. After a minute, Maverick asks where Lisa's mom, Ms. Montgomery, is. Lisa says she's at rehearsal (she teaches theater at the arts school). It means she's not around to bug Lisa as much, and it's also great that Carlos is back at college now. Lisa says that she's trying to convince him to bring his girlfriend home for Thanksgiving, so he's too distracted to annoy her. Maverick is shocked that Carlos has a girlfriend, but Lisa waves him off and goes to change.

Maverick grabs a soda and wanders down the hall to stand in Lisa's doorway. She teases him about coming to learn how to do his hair and asks if he's brushed or washed his hair recently. He insists that with an afro, he doesn't have to, but Lisa says he's wrong and sends him to the bathroom. She follows him in and washes his hair, occasionally spraying him in the face. She asks about his job with Mr. Wyatt and if he's given up dealing. Maverick says he has; he has a son to think about. He explains that Iesha left the baby with him the moment they found out he was the dad.

Maverick seems more comfortable with his fellow gang members than with his family, which may reflect Maverick's discomfort with truly feeling his grief. Spending time with the family would be harder on Maverick emotionally, since his close family members are likely grieving Dre in a more intense way than his friends are. But spending time with the gang gives Maverick an outlet to handle difficult emotions: he can help plan how he and the gang are going to avenge Dre's death. In other words, Maverick is more comfortable with distracting himself at this point than he is with being emotionally vulnerable and facing his grief head-on.



Here, Maverick has to face the uncomfortable fact that to the "big homies," he's just a little kid. While Maverick seems to want to be like Pops and do things (like kill Ant) that would make his father proud, Shawn is intent on making sure Maverick remains innocent. In addition to Maverick feeling insulted and embarrassed, this also means that Shawn is keeping Maverick from dealing with his emotions how Maverick would prefer: through violence.



For Maverick, this seems like a dream come true: Lisa is acknowledging his existence and is being kind to him, which gives him hope that he might still have a chance with her. Lisa also suggests here that she's not entirely happy in her family situation: Carlos is annoying, while Ms. Montgomery "bugs" Lisa. She, like Maverick, may want to be more independent and to be treated more like an adult. In this way, Maverick and Lisa might still have more in common than Maverick thinks.



When Maverick justifies giving up drug-dealing by saying he has a baby to think about now, it shows that he's trying to take Dre's advice to heart. It's more important to him at this point to make "clean money" than it is to make a lot of money through risky, illicit means. However, this may also just be a way to impress Lisa—something that's still really important to Maverick.



As Lisa rinses Maverick's hair, she asks what the baby's name is. She's aghast that Maverick named him Seven, after a number, but she agrees it's okay when he explains that it's the number of perfection. Maverick insists it's better than Connor, and Lisa sprays him again. She insists that she's not with Connor, but she won't say anything more.

Back in Lisa's bedroom, she kneels behind Maverick to comb his hair. He yelps and squirms, but she accuses him of being tender-headed. They argue and start to tickle each other—and then Maverick kisses Lisa. They undress and crawl into bed, but then Maverick hisses that he doesn't have a condom. Lisa says she's not on the pill anymore, but they decide to have sex as long as Maverick is careful and pulls out.

CHAPTER 12

Maverick and Lisa are in bed, sweaty and panting. Lisa says she missed Maverick. It feels like there's no one else in the world but them, until they hear Ms. Montgomery pull into the drive. Lisa and Maverick dress quickly, and then Lisa shoves Maverick out her window and doesn't answer when he asks to see her later. The next day, Maverick still doesn't know what happened. He thought they were speaking again, but Lisa still has his number blocked. He almost calls Dre before he remembers that Dre is dead.

Maverick offered to take the Sunday shift for Mr. Wyatt since Jamal is off. He needs the money and the distraction, so he leaves Seven with Ma and heads for the store. There, he starts to work through Mr. Wyatt's long list of tasks. As Maverick works, Mr. Wyatt stands outside with Mr. Lewis and Mr. Reuben. Maverick thinks that bosses get to pay other people to work while they chat, and he realizes that he wants to be like them. When the phone rings, he hurries back to the office to answer it. But then, it occurs to him: Lisa probably hasn't blocked the store's number.

Maverick dials Lisa's house phone, but Ms. Montgomery picks up. He respectfully asks to talk to Lisa, but she hangs up on him. The bell rings up front, so Maverick puts the phone down and returns to mopping. Mr. Lewis gripes that Maverick is a lousy employee, but Mr. Wyatt notes that he didn't ask for Mr. Lewis's opinion. When Mr. Lewis continues to insult Maverick, Maverick asks if Mr. Wyatt would like him to sweep the curb. Mr. Wyatt sends Maverick outside, seeming to hold back a smile.

Maverick is discovering that his parenting decisions (like Seven's name) aren't going to make sense to everyone. More broadly, though, giving Seven such a unique name is a way for Maverick to assert his individuality—and Seven's as well.



Maverick and Lisa clearly still have feelings for each other if they're willing to have sex again. In this sense, Maverick might have a wider support network than he originally thought. But having unprotected sex comes with its own risks, like pregnancy—and given that Maverick already got another girl pregnant, this is ominous foreshadowing for what's to come.



Lisa's behavior is very confusing for Maverick. He desperately wants them to get back together, so it's hurtful that, after having sex, she's gone back to ignoring him. To make matters worse, he feels alone and unable to talk to anyone about his feelings. Dre was probably the only person who would've understood—but now, Dre is gone.



Maverick is undergoing several important changes here: first, he's starting to think of work as something enjoyable as well as necessary. He's also starting to think that having a job like Mr. Wyatt's wouldn't be such a bad thing. Mr. Wyatt, Mr. Lewis, and Mr. Reuben, Maverick realizes, lead lives similar to the "big homies" in the King Lords, in that they have a certain level of autonomy and authority of others. But, unlike gangsters, they're not in danger of dying or getting arrested because of their line of work.



Maverick is also getting better at controlling his temper and his reactions. He knows that he can't outright insult Mr. Lewis—that would make him look bad in front of his employer. Here, then, Maverick realizes that many of the same rules that guide gangsters' behavior applies elsewhere. Just as gangsters had to laugh at Shawn's jokes in the first chapter because Shawn is the "crown," here, Maverick has to respect Mr. Wyatt's wishes because he's the boss.



It's quiet outside until two girls come out of Reuben's: Lala and Ilesha. Maverick runs across the street and grabs Ilesha. She clearly doesn't want to talk, but she tells Lala to go on ahead and asks how her baby is. Maverick wants to know where she's been. Ilesha explains that she's been with friends, and being homeless isn't good for a baby. Maverick takes in her fresh nails and new clothes. He remembers Ma saying that poverty can look like a lot of different things, so he asks why she hasn't visited Seven. Ilesha is aghast that Maverick is calling the baby Seven, so again, he has to explain the significance. Ilesha looks down and says that Seven is too perfect for her, and she runs away.

Remembering Ma's saying about how poverty doesn't always look the same helps Maverick develop empathy. If he wants to have a constructive conversation with Ilesha, he needs to take her at her word that she's homeless and struggling. But it's still incomprehensible to him that Ilesha doesn't seem to want to have anything to do with her son. This suggests that she's still struggling emotionally after having to parent Seven all by herself, showing the consequences of not having enough support.



CHAPTER 13

At lunch the next day, Maverick is so caught up in thinking about his conversation with Ilesha that he doesn't notice anything else going on in the school cafeteria. Rico and Junie call Maverick to pay attention, but he can't stop thinking about how overwhelmed he and Ilesha feel. He doesn't know what to do about anything—Ilesha, Lisa, Dre, or Seven. Maverick looks across the cafeteria to where Ant sits, but he can't tell Rico and Junie about Ant. They'll tell everyone. Junie says that Maverick is probably thinking about Dre, and he and Rico acknowledge that death is hard to get over. Rico lost his twin to a stray bullet when they were nine, and Junie's aunt was stabbed at a block party a few years ago.

Seven is Maverick's whole world right now, so it makes sense that he's so caught up in his conversation with Ilesha. School, for him, isn't as interesting as it once was. But for Rico and Junie, it's hard to understand why Maverick wouldn't be paying attention. They show that they're good friends, though, when they do acknowledge that Maverick is probably still grieving for Dre. They recognize that all people experience grief—even them. However, they decide what Maverick is thinking about rather than asking him, which suggests that they're not showing him as much compassion or interest as Maverick perhaps needs.



Rico reminds Maverick that tough people survive, making him laugh. Junie says that there's a lot to catch up on: Cortez is back in jail, but not for what he and DeMario were doing. Maverick pretends to know what's going on. Then, Junie says that King brought them on to sell. Maverick is surprised and asks why they didn't tell him. Junie says that since Maverick isn't around much, they figured this didn't concern him. Maverick is hurt, but he asks if they're worried about Shawn. Rico and Junie aren't, and Rico rolls his eyes when Maverick says this sounds like a coup. He tells Maverick to do something better with his time than read books.

Again, Maverick has to confront the fact that, because he's parenting Seven full-time, he hasn't been around or as involved with his friends. He has no idea what's going on with Cortez and DeMario—and it's also worth noting that Junie and Rico don't seem to have any intention of clueing Maverick in. Through this, they propose that if Maverick isn't going to put in the time to figure things out for himself, he's not going to ever know what's going on.



The bell rings. Maverick dumps his tray and watches Ant do the same. Then, he follows Ant to world literature. Mrs. Turner catches Maverick on his way into the classroom and asks how he is. Then, she tells him that Mr. Clayton wants to talk and gives Maverick a hall pass. Ant calls Maverick "weak ass" and says it was only a matter of time before Dre was killed. Mrs. Turner grabs Maverick before he can retaliate and gives Ant detention. She nudges Maverick into the hallway. Maverick has no desire to go talk to the counselor, so he decides to skip school.

Ant is trying to get on Maverick's nerves here by calling him "weak ass" and speaking so rudely about Dre's death. This shows that even at school, gang rivalry is alive and well. However, the fact that the counselor wants to talk to Maverick shows that the school wants to support its students through difficult periods. If Maverick were willing to accept the help, he might find more people who could help him process his emotions.



As Maverick walks through the cold wind, Shawn's car pulls up beside him. Shawn says they need to talk, man-to-man. Maverick climbs into the passenger seat. After complimenting Maverick's clothes, Shawn says he isn't treating Maverick like a kid—he's treating him like a brother. He'll forever be the little kid they ditched at the mall. Maverick sighs at the memory; he'd wanted to play at the arcade while Dre and Shawn wanted to pick up girls, so they gave him money for a milkshake and were gone when he returned to the table. Shawn says that after that, Dre insisted that if Maverick couldn't go, he couldn't go either. Maverick pinches the bridge of his nose.

Shawn says the point is that he sees Maverick as a little brother. Dre wouldn't want Maverick to murder someone for him if he didn't even really want Maverick selling cannabis. Instead, Dre wanted Maverick to care for his family. Shawn also says that killing is easy—but living with yourself afterwards is hard, if you live at all. He asks Maverick if he really wants Ma to have to bury him, and Maverick says no. Shawn insists that he needs to take care of this one. He tells Maverick not to worry about how the other guys in the gang think he's soft, and to live for himself and for Dre. He needs to be the best dad he can be.

Shawn then asks Maverick why he's not in school and how King, Junie, and Rico are doing. He says he's looking for Red right now; Red promised him a big-screen TV but has been missing for a week. Maverick tells Shawn about the fake Jordans as Shawn opens his glove box: it contains Shawn's gun and a rolled blunt. Shawn smokes as he drives and then passes the blunt to Maverick. Maverick doesn't really like cannabis, but he reasons that it'll take away the pain for a bit.

Time goes slowly and then speeds up. Everything seems funny, though Maverick tells himself he's not that high. Shawn drops Maverick off at Mr. Wyatt's house. Mr. Wyatt left a list for Maverick with Mrs. Wyatt since he won't be home until later, so Maverick climbs the steps to the front door. There are too many steps. Mrs. Wyatt answers the door with Seven, gives Maverick a funny look, and sends him into the yard. Mr. Wyatt is already there. He explains that he left Jamal at the store so he could "spend time with [his] bride." Maverick hopes Seven wasn't exposed to "old person sex"—and then he realizes that he said that out loud.

Unlike the counselor, Shawn is a trustworthy figure who can help Maverick figure things out. And Shawn makes it clear that while he does think of Maverick as a younger brother in need of protection, that's not the same thing as treating Maverick like a kid. By bringing up Dre, Shawn also makes it clear that it's not just him who thinks this way—he's trying to do what Dre would've wanted him to do and take care of Maverick.



Shawn proposes here that the best way for Maverick to honor Dre is by living his life and being the kind of dad that Dre never got the opportunity to be. With this, Shawn implies that he knew Dre was unhappy in the gang and may have wanted to quit to focus his attentions on fatherhood. But while it's impossible to go back and change things for Dre, Shawn knows that he can encourage Maverick to focus on his family and to honor Dre through that.



Opening up the glove box to reveal the gun as Maverick and Shawn talk about Red's shady deals is threatening. It suggests that Shawn might take it upon himself to deal with Red violently if Red doesn't comply with his requests. Maverick's choice to smoke here shows just how emotional he is about Dre: he's so upset that he'll turn to a substance he doesn't even like, just to escape his emotions.



It seems as though Maverick may have lost track of time, since the narration implies that Maverick is actually late for work. Another effect of the cannabis is that Maverick isn't able to filter his thoughts and only say polite, appropriate things—which will certainly go over poorly with Mr. Wyatt. The cannabis may make Maverick feel less upset about Dre, but it's not helping him get through the rest of his life.



Mr. Wyatt's lips go thin, and he asks if Maverick has been smoking "reefer." Maverick guffaws and says that no one calls it that, but Mr. Wyatt says this is strike number two. He hands Maverick a hoe and tells him to get to work. Three hours later, Maverick suspects that Mr. Wyatt is going to kill him. He's had to carry heavy things, pull weeds, and hoe. As Mr. Wyatt sits on a bench, sipping lemonade, Maverick begs for a break and some water. Mr. Wyatt insists that's just the reefer talking; Maverick doesn't really need water. He also insists that Maverick must've felt like he needed the reefer if he came to work high.

Mr. Wyatt's insistence on using the word "reefer," a dated term for cannabis, makes him sound critical and out of touch with Maverick's generation—and it also shows Maverick that Mr. Wyatt isn't going to be sympathetic at all. He's going to stay stuck in his thinking, and he's not going to let Maverick get away with coming to work high. Though Maverick resents this, Mr. Wyatt is teaching Maverick professional norms—norms that Maverick will need to know if he's going to be a boss one day, like Mr. Wyatt.



Maverick snaps that he just wanted to stop thinking about Dre. Mr. Wyatt calls Maverick to come sit, and he asks if Maverick really thought drugs were the best way to stop thinking about Dre. Cannabis isn't as bad as other drugs, but it's still illegal—and Maverick is only 17. Maverick reiterates that he just needed to stop thinking about Dre, and Mr. Wyatt asks why. Maverick explains he saw Dre dead, and that he can't think about it. Again, Mr. Wyatt asks why. Maverick insists that he can't sit and cry; he has to be a man.

When Maverick finally reveals why he chose to smoke, Mr. Wyatt shows him some compassion. He reminds Maverick that smoking cannabis is dangerous mostly because Maverick could get arrested for it. Further, Mr. Wyatt suggests that substances aren't an appropriate way to deal with difficult emotions. Constantly asking Maverick why he thinks the way he does is a way for Mr. Wyatt to pry into Maverick's reasoning and force Maverick to confront his uncomfortable emotions in a way that Maverick's fellow gang members don't encourage.



After a long silence, Mr. Wyatt sighs that it's a huge lie that Black men don't have feelings. Black men have the right to show their emotions, just like everyone else. Maverick stares at the ground, his legs shaking. Mr. Wyatt grabs the back of Maverick's neck and tells him to let it out, and Maverick starts to sob. Mr. Wyatt hugs him and says it'll be okay, but Maverick knows it won't. After all, Dre is dead.

Here, Mr. Wyatt teaches Maverick that the societal pressure to suppress one's emotional is harmful—particularly for Black men, who Mr. Wyatt implies are most often pressured to be stoic. It not only causes them to turn to substances or violence to deal with those emotions—it gives other people a reason to dehumanize them.



CHAPTER 14

On Friday morning, Ma offers to watch Seven and insists Maverick go to the football game that evening. Now, Maverick enters the stadium with Junie, King, and Rico; he has \$10 from Ma in his pocket. At football games, gang affiliation doesn't matter—only school loyalty does. It seems like most of the Garden has come to this away game at a fancier school. The boys find a spot near the 50-yard line, catcall some girls, and tease Maverick about being let out of his house arrest. Rico asks if Ilesha ever helps, but Maverick says she's having a hard time. He asks King if he's seen Ilesha, but he tells Maverick to forget her.

Agreeing to watch Seven so Maverick can go to the football game shows that Ma recognizes Maverick is still a kid—he still needs fun, carefree evenings with his friends. This is one way that she shows him her support. But Maverick's friends are unwilling to accept that Maverick has different priorities now that he's a dad, which is why they joke that he's been on "house arrest." From their perspective, Ma is forcibly keeping him at home.



The marching band takes the field. Maverick checks out the drum majorettes, but he knows he's too hung up on Lisa to try to pursue another girl. He's been leaving messages in her mailbox, but Ms. Montgomery must be stealing them. King watches as the team runs onto the field and says he misses football more than anything. Then, King looks back to the bleachers and asks why Ant is staring at them. Maverick says that Ant is probably still upset about getting detention with Mrs. Turner last week. King assures Maverick that he, Rico, and Junie have his back if Ant tries anything tonight. Maverick realizes that even though Dre is gone, he still has brothers.

By halftime, Maverick feels like himself again. Figuring the line at concessions is short, Maverick says he's going to get food and asks if anyone else wants some. Rico and Junie give Maverick a list and thank him for buying, but Maverick says he isn't paying for everyone. King offers to help out and follows Maverick to the line. It turns out to be very long. Maverick sees how expensive nachos are and laments that it'll take all his money. King is shocked that Maverick only has \$10 and shows him a roll of \$100 bills. He says that with Dre gone, there's nothing stopping Maverick from getting back into it, but Maverick insists that he's trying to stay out of trouble.

Shaking his head, King asks if Maverick is at least going to go after Dre's killer. Maverick explains that Shawn ordered him to leave it to the "big homies." King spits that Maverick is being soft; it's his responsibility to look out for his family. He says that Maverick dropped out of their deal, and now he's home like a housewife—he won't avenge Dre's death, which King says is ridiculous. Before he can say more, though, a fight breaks out between some GDs, including Ant, and the local Latin Royals. A moment later, there are three gunshots, and everyone scatters. Ant is dead.

CHAPTER 15

It's been three weeks since Ant died, and things have been weird. Maverick realized that Ant had parents and friends, just like Dre, and he's not sure how to feel now that Dre's killer is dead. Shawn is also conflicted, though he agrees that Ant probably did kill Dre. Maverick throws himself into school, work, and caring for Seven. Things are starting to get better: Seven has just started sleeping four hours at a time. It's Sunday, and Ma is out with Moe, so Maverick plays with Seven. Now that Seven is eating more expensive baby food, they don't have cable anymore, and Maverick had to sell his video game console and his stereo.

Even if Maverick's friendships with Junie, Rico, and King might feel like they're fracturing in some regard, what King says about Ant shows Maverick that he can rely on these guys to be here for him. Life isn't over because Dre is gone—he still has the King Lords and his best friends to look out for him. With this, Maverick starts to move on and heal a little more from Dre's death.



As Maverick and King compare their respective wallets, it becomes clear to Maverick that drug-dealing is extremely lucrative. Though Maverick is acting like an adult in many ways by holding down a job and supporting his son, seeing King's \$100 bills probably makes Maverick feel childish. He is, after all, at a football game with just the \$10 that his mother gave him. This may show Maverick that though he's trying to "man up" and follow Dre's advice of working a legal job, it might not be financially viable to do so.



Though it certainly hurt Maverick to hear the "big homies" joke that he's soft, it's something else coming from King—especially when King also accuses Maverick of being like a housewife. With this, King seems to imply that Maverick isn't masculine enough, because he does the stereotypically feminine work of caring for Seven. Manliness, in King's mind, isn't about actually being there to support his kids. Ant's death, meanwhile, throws a wrench in Maverick's plan to avenge Dre's death—now, he may be forced to show his ongoing loyalty to his cousin in different ways.



With his death, Ant suddenly became human to Maverick. This is a difficult thing to deal with, as it forces Maverick to realize that the Garden Disciples aren't just faceless adversaries. They're people too, and they're probably trying to support their families, just like Maverick is and Dre was. Although Maverick and Ma are having to sacrifice to make ends meet with Seven, Maverick doesn't seem to be upset about it, while suggesting that he's happily accepting his role as a father.



The doorbell rings—it's Lisa, and she looks upset. Maverick asks her to wait because he needs to put Seven down for a nap. Lisa smiles as she takes Seven's hand. She follows Maverick into the bedroom. Maverick tells her that he's been reading parenting books that say it's important to get Seven on a schedule. Lisa's smile, meanwhile, doesn't seem genuine—Maverick knows something is going on.

Maverick sings one of Lisa's favorite songs to Seven as he changes him. Lisa dances with Maverick, and Seven seems to really like her. They put him down, and he goes to sleep easily. Outside in the hallway, Lisa asks if they can talk. They sit in the kitchen, and Lisa starts to cry. She says that her period is late—she thinks she's pregnant.

CHAPTER 16

Maverick sinks to the floor. He can't believe it; he was careful when he and Lisa had sex. He asks if the baby is his, and Lisa looks murderous. She starts to hit and kick him and says she hasn't been with anyone else. Suddenly, she's crying that she was supposed to be done with Maverick. Maverick pulls her into a hug. Lisa sniffs that she hasn't taken a test yet, but she's late and has been throwing up. Maverick says they have to get a test, but Lisa says that Ms. Montgomery will kill her if she finds out Lisa bought one. Maverick says he'll do it; no matter what happens, they'll figure this out together.

It'd be best to go to Wal-Mart, but Maverick only has \$2 and would have to steal a test. He'll have to go to Mr. Wyatt's. Maverick wonders what he'll say to Mr. Wyatt and knows that Mr. Wyatt and Ma will be disappointed. Maverick nods to Jamal outside the store and then goes inside. Mr. Lewis is there, and he quips that Maverick shouldn't expect free stuff. Maverick wanders the aisles and finally finds the pregnancy tests near the tampons. He grabs two tests and then approaches the register, setting the tests right in front of Mr. Wyatt.

Mr. Lewis says that Maverick needs a vasectomy and walks out. Maverick tells Mr. Wyatt that the tests are for a friend, but he can't say this to Mr. Wyatt's face. Mr. Wyatt asks how he plans to support two babies, but Maverick can only stare at his shoes. Mr. Wyatt grabs the back of Maverick's neck and asks who the girl is. Maverick says it's Lisa, and he admits that he doesn't have the money for the tests. Mr. Wyatt tells him not to keep her waiting and says he'll take the money out of Maverick's paycheck.

Maverick shows how important being a good parent is to him. He wants to do all the research and follow all the right advice—and he also wants to make sure Lisa sees him trying to be a good dad. Though he realizes something is wrong, he also wants to impress her.



Maverick tries to impress Lisa by singing her favorite song to Seven and creating this intimate moment between the three of them. However, Maverick's world comes crashing down again when Lisa reveals that she may be pregnant—presumably with Maverick's child.



Asking if the baby is his might seem like a valid question to Maverick after the debacle over Seven's paternity—but to Lisa, it's offensive, since Maverick is assuming that she may have had other sexual partners. Lisa realizes that being pregnant is going to upend her life—and it's going to tie her to Maverick forever. This means that her dreams of college and of getting out of Garden Heights might be more difficult to achieve given the financial and emotional strain of having a baby.



Maverick shows how mature he's becoming when he recognizes that it's better to go to Mr. Wyatt and own up to his mistakes than it would be to go to Wal-Mart and steal a test. Maverick shows that he's learning the value of honesty—and that he feels he can trust Mr. Wyatt with the news that Lisa is pregnant. This shows that Mr. Wyatt has, at this point, stepped into the role of a trusted mentor (and perhaps even a father figure) to Maverick.



Mr. Wyatt realizes that Maverick needs help, understanding, and compassion, not insults and anger. By treating Maverick like this, Mr. Wyatt ensures that Maverick will feel able to come to him with other sensitive things in the future. But he also acknowledges that Maverick isn't in a great financial situation to have two kids—this is going to be a struggle for Maverick.



Back at home, Maverick finds Lisa with three empty soda cans. She explains that she'll need a lot of pee for the tests. She takes the tests into the bathroom, insisting that they'll be negative. Maverick stands on the other side of the door until she flushes. Lisa opens the door and says it'll be five minutes, so Maverick sets a timer on his watch and sits with her, reiterating that they're in this together. They discuss Maverick's hair, and that Ms. Montgomery wants Lisa to get fitted for her prom dress now. It might not matter. The timer goes off, and Lisa stands up. She screams "no"—both of the tests have two lines on them. She's pregnant.

For the next hour, Maverick sits on the couch with Lisa as she cries. They discuss their options of abortion or adoption, and Maverick says that he's fine with whatever Lisa decides. He's certain she'll get an abortion, since it's the only option that makes sense. They hear Ma's car in the drive and then hear her come in. She stops short when she sees Lisa on the couch. Lisa apologizes and then runs for the bathroom to throw up. Ma follows Lisa, rubs her back, and asks what's going on. Maverick tells her that Lisa is pregnant. Ma doesn't react but sends Maverick to get Lisa a ginger ale.

When Maverick gets back, Lisa is done vomiting. She sips the ginger ale while Ma reminds Maverick that they've talked about this. Maverick says it was an accident, but Ma says it wasn't. Seven starts to cry in the other room, so Ma goes to check on him as Maverick helps Lisa to the couch. He goes to his room to get a blanket for her and finds Ma staring into the crib, crying. She asks if she failed him, because it feels like she has—he'll have two babies before he turns 18, and he's in a gang. Ma says she's not enough. Maverick says he'll do better, but Ma asks what his plan is. Maverick doesn't have one, and Ma knows it. She says it's time to go see Pops.

CHAPTER 17

On the day before Thanksgiving, Ma, Maverick, and Seven prepare for the three-hour drive to Evergreen Prison. It's a miracle that they're able to go at all, given all the paperwork they had to fill out for Seven. As Maverick packs the diaper bag, he calls Lisa. She hasn't told Ms. Montgomery she's pregnant yet; she believes that if she waits until Carlos is home for Thanksgiving, he'll keep Ms. Montgomery from being too angry. Lisa still hasn't said what she wants to do about the pregnancy, but Maverick is certain she's just too nervous to admit she wants an abortion.

After just a few months of parenting Seven, Maverick understands how difficult it can be to do this alone—which is why he reiterates to Lisa that they'll deal with this together. In this way, he's able to make sure Lisa feels supported and knows that he's not going to leave her on her own with a baby if she is indeed pregnant. This suggests that Maverick has learned from seeing Iesha struggling so much after Seven's birth—he knows it takes more than one person to parent a baby.



Maverick knows that Lisa plans to attend college and pursue a medical degree, so in his mind, it makes sense that Lisa wouldn't want to raise a baby. But Lisa getting an abortion would also be the easiest option for Maverick, since he's already struggling to support Seven—and in this way, he may be prioritizing what he wants over what Lisa wants. Ma's lack of a reaction may be off-putting for Maverick, but she also throws herself into helping Lisa alleviate her nausea. She may be conflicted, but she's also unflinchingly supportive.



Now, Maverick has to contend with the consequences of his actions on his own parents. Ma feels like she's failed Maverick because, in her mind, she's failed to teach him how to have safe sex and prevent unwanted pregnancies in the first place. In this way, she gives Maverick a window into what he might one day deal with as he parents his own children—and she shows him that parents never stop worrying about their kids, no matter how old they get.



Lisa seems to genuinely fear her mother's reaction, which might not bode well. But it's a good sign that she trusts Carlos to temper Ms. Montgomery's expected bad reaction. This makes it clear that while Lisa might not know if she can trust everyone in her life to support her, she does have some people (including Maverick and Ma) to lean on.



Lisa picks up the phone and tells Maverick that Carlos just got here. She's going to wait to tell everyone until after Thanksgiving in case there's drama. Maverick assures her that everything will be fine, and they'll get through it. After a pause, Lisa says that she wants to have the baby and keep it. Maverick is shocked. Lisa has plans, and a baby doesn't seem to fit with them—and now Maverick will have another baby to care for. Lisa insists that her parents will help, and she can get academic scholarships like Keisha. Her life won't be over. Maverick feels like *his* life is over, and he's silent for too long. Lisa snaps at Maverick for being unsupportive and hangs up.

As Maverick tries to strap Seven into the car, Ma observes that Seven is outgrowing his infant car seat. They get on the road, and Ma speeds as usual. Before they left, Maverick told her about Lisa wanting to keep the baby. She'd barely reacted. As they drive, Maverick stares out the window and wonders if he can handle another baby. He remembers Ma telling him that he'd miss being a kid one day, and now he gets it. He starts to cry—he's never going to sleep, have money, or see his friends again.

Evergreen Prison is in a tiny, predominately white town. The prison feels like a plantation, as it's surrounded by fields that the inmates tend. After they park, Ma and Maverick wait in the long lines. Guards even pat Seven down to make sure that there isn't something hidden in his diaper. In the visitation room, Ma grabs a table and buys one of every snack from the vending machine. After a few minutes, a buzzer buzzes and the inmates file in. Pops comes in last. He looks exactly like Maverick. He and Ma embrace, and then Pops hugs Maverick. Then, Pops turns to Seven, and the baby allows Pops to take him without much fuss. Though Pops can't touch Ma or Maverick until the end of the visit, he can hold Seven the entire time.

Ma and Pops discuss traffic and Pops's new job in the prison kitchen. The mood is light until Ma tells Pops that Maverick has something to tell him. Maverick looks down, shaking, and Pops tells him to look up and spit it out. Maverick says that Lisa is pregnant. Pops sits back and then asks Ma if she's taught Maverick about condoms. Ma snaps that this isn't her fault, and the two launch into an argument. Pops accuses Ma of neglecting Maverick to spend time with Moe, and Ma spits that she's not putting her life on hold just because Pops is in prison. Then, Ma snatches Seven and walks to the other side of the room.

Lisa is already starting to reorient herself and think about how life is going to change as she becomes a parent. She's able to see this pregnancy as a positive thing that's going to change her life, but not ruin it. Maverick, on the other hand, is looking at this from the position of already being a parent. He believes that having another child will be terrible, since it will intensify his academic and financial struggles and make it even harder for him to finish school. Lisa's anger when Maverick doesn't act as supportive as she'd like suggests that she fully trusted him to support her in whatever she chose.



With one baby he's responsible for and another on the way, Maverick can't get around the fact that he's not a kid anymore. He's growing up much faster (and in different ways) than he expected. But these changes also offer Maverick an opportunity to think about what he wants his life to be like, and who he wants to be. Now that everything's changing, he may end up with more opportunities.



Describing the prison as looking like a plantation again hints that the area surrounding Garden Heights is steeped in racism. The prison not only looks like a plantation, but it even seems to function much like historical plantations did. Enslaved Black people were forced to work on plantations, and here the prisoners (who are implied to be mostly Black, in contrast to the surrounding community) tend the fields. Visitors aren't considered trustworthy either, as even Seven is considered a possible vehicle for smuggling contraband. Inside, though, Ma tries to make everything seem as normal as possible by buying snacks for everyone.



When Pops learns of Lisa's pregnancy, he scolds Ma before he scolds Maverick. Lisa's pregnancy, he suggests, is a failure on her part more than it's a failure on Maverick's. But as they argue, Ma also makes an important point. She implies that she feels like she's putting her life on hold and perhaps has to conform to Pops's parenting beliefs even though he's in prison and isn't around to enforce anything. He is, in other words, forcing her to live a life she doesn't want.



Maverick insists to Pops that it was an accident, but Pops berates him. Babies, Pops says, aren't accidents, like bad report cards or fights. Pops tells Maverick to say what his name means. After Maverick says his name means "independent thinker," Pops asks Maverick why he wasn't thinking. Pops sighs when Maverick tells him that the baby was conceived on the day of Dre's funeral, but Pops still says that's no excuse for "doing stupid shit."

Maverick snaps: he reminds Pops that it's stupid to hide cocaine where his wife and son live. Pops tells Maverick to watch it, but he suddenly doesn't seem so scary anymore. Maverick points out that Ma is working too hard, and he had to join a gang because of what Pops did. He admits he made bad decisions, but unlike Pops, he's going to be there for his kids. Pops is silent. Maverick stands and says he's done. When Pops says that they're not done, Maverick insists that they are—he hasn't had a dad since he was eight.

Maverick grabs the car key and heads outside. He knows he hurt Pops, but he doesn't care. At the car, he pulls out his beeper and finds several pages from an unknown number. Maverick dials the number from the payphone and gets Tammy, who puts Lisa on the line. Lisa sounds like she's been crying and says that Ms. Montgomery kicked her out. When Ma comes out with Seven an hour later, Maverick tells her everything Lisa said: that Ms. Montgomery got suspicious of the vomiting and said a bunch of things Lisa won't repeat. Then she told Lisa to get out.

Ma is angry with Maverick and ignores him the entire drive home. Back in the Garden, she drops him off at Ms. Rosalie's. Ms. Rosalie lets Maverick in and sends him back to Tammy's room. Lisa sniffs that Carlos didn't defend her at all, and she never expected Ms. Montgomery to kick her out. Maverick says it'll be fine; Lisa can come live with him. Lisa says Ms. Rosalie already offered her Brenda's room, and when Maverick protests, Lisa says that this baby doesn't make them a couple. She needs space.

Insisting this baby was an accident is an attempt for Maverick to absolve himself of any responsibility. But readers will remember that Maverick and Lisa discussed that they didn't have any sort of protection—and they chose to have sex anyway. Saying they had sex after Dre's funeral is another way for Maverick to avoid taking responsibility.



Both Maverick and Pops have made mistakes that have had meaningful consequences for the family. But Maverick is starting to think more critically about what kind of a father he'd like to be. He suggests here that he's going to prioritize being around for his kids in person over anything else. Pops might've been able to provide for Ma and Maverick before he was imprisoned, but now he can't support them financially or with his presence.



Both Maverick and Lisa have just lost people in their support networks. But the fact that Lisa is with Tammy suggests that Lisa still has friends to draw on. With their help and Maverick's, Lisa will hopefully be able to get the help and support she needs.



To Maverick, there's an easy fix for Ms. Montgomery kicking Lisa out: Lisa will just come live with him, Seven, and Ma. To him, that makes sense and is how things should be. But Lisa insists here that although Maverick may be the father of her child, he's being presumptuous to think that she's going to take him back as her boyfriend because of this.



When Maverick reminds her that they're in this together, Lisa snaps that Maverick didn't seem very supportive this morning. She says if he wasn't actually okay with whatever she chose, he shouldn't have said he was. Now, she needs to do what's best for her and the baby, and she's not sure that Maverick is what's best for her. She doesn't want her baby to have a "gangbanger" for a father. Maverick protests that he's working for Mr. Wyatt now, but Lisa knows he doesn't have a plan beyond that, and she knows he's still in the King Lords. Maverick accuses her of not understanding what life is like on the streets, and Lisa snaps that she and her baby deserve better. Hurt and angry, Maverick leaves.

As Lisa starts to think of herself as a future parent, she realizes that she needs to make tough choices about who's there to support her and what kind of support they can offer. In her mind, Maverick isn't very supportive or reliable—he could die at any moment because of his association with the King Lords. Further, she knows his job with Mr. Wyatt doesn't pay enough to support a second baby. This is very insulting to Maverick, since in his mind, he's doing everything in his power to get by—and to him, it seems like Lisa resents him for circumstances that aren't his fault.



CHAPTER 18

Thanksgiving was Maverick's favorite holiday until Dre died. Even though the house usually feels full and happy when the entire family is there, today, it feels empty. The family isn't laughing as much as usual, and Maverick is still in a bad mood after what happened with Lisa. He carries Seven into the kitchen. Seven is very clingy today and won't let Maverick put him down; when he whines, Maverick fetches him a bottle. Granny tells Maverick that she made three pans of cornbread dressing, his favorite.

For Maverick, a family gathering like Thanksgiving isn't as meaningful without Dre around. He's still grieving his cousin, and this is made worse after Lisa's insults. But Maverick also can't ignore that he has people around who love him and are willing to help him, like Granny. Making his favorite Thanksgiving dish is a way for her to show she cares.



Granny says that her baby has to have his favorite, but Ma quips that Maverick isn't a baby—he *makes* babies. She reveals that Lisa is pregnant. Both Aunt 'Nita and Granny groan, and Maverick thinks he's just a "dumbass." When the doorbell rings, Maverick runs to answer it. He figures it's Shawn or King, and sure enough, it's King—with Ilesha draped over him. She reaches for Seven, but Maverick steps back and asks what's going on. Ma comes into the hallway and seems suspicious. Then, she purses her lips and asks Maverick and Ilesha to follow her into the bedroom.

Though Maverick knows Granny and Ma love him, he's still hoping that whoever's at the door can offer him a much-needed escape from their scolding and disapproval. When King shows up with Ilesha, Maverick realizes that his main loyalty is to his son, not his friend.



Maverick brings Seven in with them, and Ma closes the door. She fixes Ilesha with a glare and asks where she's been; Ilesha should've been checking in. Ilesha and Maverick argue about who's had a harder time parenting Seven, but Ma cuts them off. Ilesha looks down and mumbles that she felt bad and couldn't handle it—and Seven doesn't need her when she's in "that bad space." Ma sighs and says that this week, they're all going to Cousin Gary's. Ilesha is going to make Maverick Seven's legal father, change Seven's name, and give Maverick custody, which he needs to get government assistance. They can do this the easy way, or they can go to court.

Though Ma acknowledges that Ilesha went through a rough time parenting Seven all by herself, she also makes it clear that parents owe it to their children to be there for them. Now, Ma insists that the way Ilesha can best support Seven is by doing the paperwork to make sure that Maverick is able to receive government assistance so that he can care for Seven to the best of his abilities. The fact that it's Ma saying these things shows Maverick clearly that Ma is on his side and will support him.



Ilesha frets that she won't be able to see Seven, but Ma says they'll start with one visitation day a week. Finally, Ilesha asks if she can have Seven now. Maverick hands him over, but Seven cries and reaches for Maverick. Ma reminds Ilesha that she hasn't been around for months; Seven will need time. Aunt 'Nita calls for dinner, and they leave the room.

The family joins hands in the kitchen so that Granny can say grace. Grace takes 15 minutes, and Maverick is ready to die of shame when Granny asks God to help Maverick stop making babies. When it's over, Maverick gets Seven into his highchair. Ma tells Maverick to eat and says that Ilesha will feed Seven, loudly enough for everyone to hear. Ilesha comes over immediately when she sees Ma's glare, and Maverick smiles. He fixes himself two plates and then heads to the porch, where he and Dre used to sit.

King comes out the front door and sits down with Maverick like nothing is wrong. Maverick asks what's up with him being back together with Ilesha and bringing her here, but King insists that with Maverick not being around much, he didn't think he needed to share. Suddenly, a rusty Datsun screeches to a stop in front of the house, interrupting Maverick and King's argument. Carlos flies out of the car and punches Maverick in the eye. He drags Maverick onto the yard and beats him until King and three of Ma's cousins drag him off. Carlos screams at Maverick that he ruined Lisa's life, and then he drives away.

CHAPTER 19

Maverick's eye is still swollen and bruised when he goes back to school on Monday. Junie and Rico are shocked and offer to beat up whoever did this, but Maverick maintains that he fell down the stairs. To get Junie and Rico to stop teasing him, Maverick asks how things are on the streets. Rico says that Shawn got arrested on Thanksgiving: the police found his unregistered gun when they pulled him over, and because he's a felon, he'll be locked up for a while. Junie says that all the "big homies" are fighting over who gets to lead the gang, and Rico says that with both Dre and Shawn gone, none of the big homies care about them. He's glad to be working with King.

In general, infants get attached to the people they see frequently—and Ilesha hasn't been in Seven's life for months. So, to him, she's not someone he knows is trustworthy, even though she's his mother. Though this is heartbreaking for Ilesha, for Maverick, this also drives home how present he's been as a parent.



Though Maverick feels ashamed, his family issues aren't as severe compared to Lisa's, as her mom kicked her out when she discovered Lisa was pregnant. Maverick's family, for all their faults, is going to be there for him and make sure that he never feels like he has to be a parent all on his own.



The rift developing between Maverick and King is becoming more and more apparent. To Maverick, it's ridiculous that King would be back with Ilesha and not encourage Ilesha to check up on her son. But to King, Maverick doesn't deserve to know anything about his life if Maverick isn't going to play an active role in the gang or in their friendship anymore. Maverick is, essentially, being forced to choose between his friends and his son.



Shawn's sudden disappearance drives home for readers that being part of a gang and dealing drugs is dangerous—it can mean a person is at constant risk of being imprisoned. Shawn's arrest also has implications for everyone else still in Garden Heights: with him gone, the younger gangsters don't trust that there's anyone else to look out for them, keep them safe, and make sure they have enough money. King is starting to step in and fill that role.



The conversation turns to the winter dance. Junie and Rico are planning on getting a limo and renting tuxes, but Maverick knows Ma won't watch Seven while she's still so upset about Lisa. Maverick also knows he can't afford the several hundred dollars; he says he needs to buy Seven a new car seat. Junie laughs about Maverick's dusty shoes, the same pair he's been wearing since summer. Maverick knows that if he was dealing drugs, he'd be able to buy shoes and stuff for Seven—but Dre wouldn't want him to. As he follows Junie and Rico to class, Maverick thinks he's living in a different world now. He feels like his life is over when Mr. Phillips reminds his class that there's an exam today. Maverick didn't study at all.

By the end of the day, Maverick has taken three tests he forgot to study for. He puts his head back on the bus; he's headed downtown to go with Lisa to her doctor's appointment. The doctor's office is on the fifth floor of a skyscraper, and Maverick feels out of place among all the businessmen in the building. The office is also clearly not the free clinic; it's clean and has a fountain. In the waiting room, he finds Lisa with Carlos. Lisa looks from Maverick's black eye to Carlos's bandaged hand and rolls her eyes. She tells Carlos that he should be just as mad at her as he is at Maverick, since she participated in making the baby.

A nurse calls Lisa's name, and Maverick is shocked: the nurse is Moe. Maverick and Carlos follow Lisa, and Moe reminds them that only one person can go back with Lisa. Carlos gives Maverick a dirty look as Maverick follows her back. Moe takes Lisa's weight while another nurse takes blood and urine samples. Then, Moe takes Lisa to an exam room and tells her to put a hospital gown on for Dr. Byrd. Moe assures Lisa that they'll take good care of her—Ma would kill her if she didn't. Maverick says he's surprised Moe didn't stop by on Thanksgiving, and Moe's smile seems to dim. She leaves the room.

Maverick is confused. He turns to Lisa, but Lisa just asks him if he really hasn't figured it out yet. Lisa smirks and starts to undress. She gives Maverick an evil look when he stares at her breasts and threatens to send him out, so Maverick picks up an odd-looking toy on the table. He asks what kind of toy it is, and Lisa says it's a model uterus. Maverick drops it. When he looks back at Lisa, she's sitting on the table, wearing the gown.

Again, Junie and Rico don't understand that Maverick has different priorities now than he did six months ago. He has car seats and diapers to think about, and those things are more important to him than the school dance. But Maverick also recognizes that things could be easier financially if he was dealing drugs. Dealing, he knows, would make him more than enough money to live his life and support his children. But because Maverick is still so loyal to Dre, he knows he can't give in to that line of thinking.



Seeing a doctor downtown in a skyscraper shows that Lisa and Maverick come from different economic backgrounds. Her family is wealthier and can afford to pay for better healthcare, while Maverick's family is relegated to the free clinic. When Lisa snaps that Carlos should be mad at her too, it shows that she's taking responsibility for getting pregnant. This contrasts greatly to how Maverick told Pops this baby was an "accident."



By allowing Maverick and not Carlos to go back with her for the appointment, Lisa shows that she wants Maverick to be involved—perhaps Maverick's desire for them to be a couple isn't so out of line after all. Meanwhile, Moe's reaction when Maverick asks about Thanksgiving is odd, and it seems like Maverick must be missing something.



Lisa confirms that Maverick is missing something about Ma and Moe's relationship, but the novel is purposefully vague about what this is. As Maverick plays with the model uterus, it shows how little he knows about women's bodies and what pregnancy entails. Even though he's a father, he still has a great deal to learn about women and babies.



Lisa and Maverick discuss Carlos's bad behavior, and Lisa apologizes for being so mean last week. She says that she's still sick all the time, but school has been "interesting." After she told her coach she's pregnant, she was called to the office to "discuss [her] salvation." She's sinned, and they tried to convince her to choose adoption. When she told them that she's keeping the baby, they told her to marry the father so that the baby won't be born out of wedlock. Maverick jokes that he'd be fine with that, but Lisa's face falls. She reminds Maverick that they're not a couple; she doesn't want her baby to have a "gangbanger" father.

Dr. Byrd, a heavysset Black woman, comes in, interrupting Maverick and Lisa's conversation. Maverick is shocked that it seems like the entire office is Black. Dr. Byrd takes his and Lisa's family history and doesn't talk down to them. After Dr. Byrd performs a pelvic exam, she asks if they have any questions. Lisa came prepared with a list of questions and even asks if she can have sex. Dr. Byrd says that she can, and Maverick is shocked. He asks if the baby will "see stuff," but Dr. Byrd chuckles and says it'll be fine. She asks if Maverick has any questions—he clearly wants to be involved. The only question Maverick can think of that won't make him sound dumb is when they'll know if it's a boy or a girl.

Dr. Byrd says that they can't find out this early, but they will do an ultrasound today to confirm Lisa's due date and possibly hear the heartbeat. As Dr. Byrd gets Lisa situated for the ultrasound, Lisa lets Maverick take her hand. On the screen, a black hole appears with a white blob in the middle. Dr. Byrd points out the baby's head and the heart. Then, she turns a dial, and they hear the heartbeat. Maverick doesn't have words, and Lisa's eyes glisten. Dr. Byrd says that Lisa is due mid-July, and she prints sonogram pictures for Lisa and Maverick.

Maverick leads Lisa to the billing desk. It turns out that Ms. Montgomery hasn't taken Lisa off her insurance, so insurance covers all but a \$20 copay. Maverick digs into his wallet, but he only has gum. Carlos comes over, hands the lady at the desk money, and says that Maverick has too many kids to pay for. He asks how Maverick is going to care for Lisa's baby and then leads Lisa out of the office. It feels like everyone is depending on Maverick, but Maverick can't do much with his paychecks from Mr. Wyatt. Dre was wrong—Maverick has to sell drugs again.

Lisa attends a Catholic school, which is why her school's administration is so concerned about her salvation and what she's going to do with the baby. The school's advice to marry the father implies that they don't support abortion or adoption as options for pregnant women. But Lisa clearly isn't ready to even consider marrying anyone, let alone Maverick.



When Maverick is shocked that the entire office seems to be Black, it implies that he expects medical professionals to be white. This is perhaps a consequence of growing up in Garden Heights, where Black people like Maverick and his family are largely disenfranchised. This doctor's visit, in other words, is introducing Maverick to the idea that Black people are just as capable of becoming successful professionals as people of other races are. Lisa demonstrates her maturity by coming prepared with so many questions, while Maverick's question about whether the baby will "see stuff" if he and Lisa have sex is comparatively immature. But still, Maverick doesn't want to look young or unintelligent in front of the doctor. Given how little he knows about pregnancy, asking when they can find out the baby's sex is all he can come up with.



Lisa continues to give Maverick mixed signals by allowing him to take her hand here—she wants his support, but only on her terms. Seeing the baby on the ultrasound and hearing the heartbeat helps make this pregnancy real for Maverick. It shows him that he's going to have one more person to care for, and it helps him start to connect to his new child.



It's extremely shameful for Maverick when he can't pay Lisa's copay. This shows how much Maverick's economic choices are guided by his desire to avoid shame. It's not so bad to work for Mr. Wyatt for comparatively low wages when Maverick only has to worry about basic necessities. But working for Mr. Wyatt suddenly becomes far more shameful when Maverick realizes that the job doesn't give him enough to support his future child.



CHAPTER 20

It's a beautiful spring day, and there's already grass growing on Dre's grave. Maverick sits against the headstone and picks up a drawing that Dreanna made. It makes him cry. He talks to Dre and says that things are hectic, but he's not skipping school today—he has a day off. Things are rough in the streets since Shawn got arrested, and he might never get out. The police traced his gun to a murder. Now, P-Nut calls himself “the crown,” and Maverick, King, Junie, and Rico decided they have to take care of themselves. They're also looking out for the “youngins.” He admits that they're selling drugs, but he won't work for P-Nut, and he assures Dre that this is temporary.

Maverick imagines Dre's disbelieving look and assures him that it's just enough to help Ma without raising her suspicions. Touching the grass, Maverick tells Dre about how Mr. Wyatt talks about plants like they're women. He admits that he's struggling in his classes and knows he'll have to go to summer school. Maverick gives Dre an update on Keisha and Dreanna, and then the tears come. He imagines Dre telling him it's okay, but Maverick knows it isn't.

Maverick laughs and tells Dre about his visit with Pops. Maverick says he doesn't need a father since he himself is a father now. He says that if his and Lisa's baby is a boy, they're going to name him after Dre. Then, he says he has a Valentine's Day surprise planned for Lisa: he's taking her to tour Markham State. After that, she'll have to give him a chance. Now, it's time to go meet Lisa to ride the bus home with her after school. Leaving Dre is difficult.

Maverick goes to Saint Mary's and waits by a phone booth. It looks like he's waiting for Lisa—but he's also waiting for customers. It annoys him that for the rich white people he sells to, drugs just mean a fun weekend. For him, it's dangerous, but it's what he has to do to keep the lights on. Maverick sells to three people before Lisa appears with Connor—he's holding her backpack. They approach Maverick, and Connor gives Lisa a teddy bear for the baby. Lisa is thrilled, but Maverick asks if it's too early for that. Connor kisses Lisa's cheek and walks away.

It's unclear exactly how much time has passed between Lisa's doctor's appointment and now, but Maverick makes it clear that lots of things have changed in the interim. He's now back to selling drugs with King, and the King Lords are no longer the reliable force they've been for years. But even though Maverick frames selling drugs as a necessity, assuring Dre that this is temporary shows how uncomfortable Maverick is with this.



Again, Maverick makes it clear that there are real reasons why he has to sell drugs: he has to help Ma. Not helping her isn't an option. Then, it's significant that Maverick allows himself to cry on Dre's grave. This suggests that he's taking some of Mr. Wyatt's advice to heart by allowing himself to express his emotions.



Maverick makes the assertion that he doesn't need support just because he has kids of his own. But the novel has shown that this isn't true: Maverick has needed Ma's help and Mr. Wyatt's help, and he'd certainly appreciate Pops's help if his father was able to be around more. Maverick's insistence on self-sufficiency just reflects how angry he is with Pops right now.



It's impossible for Maverick to ignore how dangerous selling drugs is—he recognizes that he, like Pops, could be arrested and serve a long prison sentence if he's caught. But for the wealthy white people he sells to, there seems to be little recognition that drug-dealing is dangerous for Maverick. Maverick's buyers, in other words, don't realize (or don't care) that in buying drugs, they're essentially buying into the gang culture and illegal activity that puts Maverick and other dealers at risk.



As Maverick and Lisa walk to the bus stop, Lisa says that Connor isn't in a gang and is doing stuff with his life. Plus, she and Maverick are just friends. Maverick asks how "he" (the baby) is doing, but Lisa says that she's willing to bet \$10 and ribs from Reuben's that it's a girl. Maverick accepts the bet. Lisa says that Maverick's baby wants ribs, and Maverick laughs—whenever Maverick messes up, Ma tells him that he's exclusively Pops's son. Lisa says that Maverick should talk to Pops, since she'd give anything for Ms. Montgomery to check in on her. Maverick asks about her day to avoid talking about it, but Lisa puts on headphones to tune him out.

Maverick can't get over Lisa being with Connor. He feels like he's doing everything a good boyfriend should do, but Lisa is too caught up with a white boy and a teddy bear. Once he and Lisa get back to the Garden, Maverick walks her to Tammy's house. There's an unfamiliar red car in the drive—and inside, they find Tammy's older sister, Brenda. Ms. Rosalie cradles Brenda's month-old son, Khalil. Brenda explains that she and Jerome are moving back to the Garden to be close to Ms. Rosalie. Maverick has heard that no one likes Jerome.

Ms. Rosalie heads to the kitchen to get started on dinner, and though she rolls her eyes, she accepts a few \$100 bills from Maverick to help out. Lisa asks if she can hold Khalil, and Brenda settles her in the armchair with the baby. Maverick perches on the arm and marvels at how tiny Khalil is, but Brenda assures him that he's not that fragile. Then, they discuss whether Lisa's baby is a boy or a girl. If it's a boy, she and Maverick are going to name him after Dre. Brenda offers her condolences and says that Dre and Jerome were each other's customers.

A door opens down the hall, and a raspy voice says that he needed a nap. Red comes out of Tammy's room, teases Brenda, and then greets everyone else. Maverick thinks he should've known Red's real name wasn't Red. Red gives Maverick a forced smile; he's clearly still angry that Maverick and King knocked his tables over. When Red goes to pick up Khalil, Maverick notices Dre's watch on Red's wrist. It was stolen the night Dre was killed.

Lisa deeply misses her mother's support, and in her mind, it makes sense that Maverick would be missing Pops, too. But Maverick is still too angry to figure out how to have a relationship with Pops. He believes that part of growing up and becoming an adult means totally separating himself from Pops, which is partially why he's refusing to talk to him right now.



Again, Maverick seems to believe that doing nice things for Lisa should win her over—but clearly, this relationship isn't going to work this way. Although Maverick focuses on the fact that Connor is white, Lisa has said that she likes him because he's "doing things" with his life. Connor's race isn't necessarily why Lisa is drawn to him over Maverick—Maverick may be less desirable of a partner because he's in a gang and has no plans to do anything else.



The \$100 bills are presumably drug money, which implies that Maverick is able to live much more comfortably and support other people in his life now that he's dealing again. Although dealing drugs is dangerous, it gives Maverick freedom and makes him feel more in control of his life. Seeing Khalil, meanwhile, gives Maverick a taste of what having a new baby is going to be like.



Seeing Dre's watch on Red's wrist sets off alarm bells for Maverick, especially since the gang never conclusively figured out who killed Dre. But discovering that Red might be connected in this setting, with his newborn son, reminds Maverick that Red is human too. Like Ant, Red has family, friends, and a life outside of being a hustler.



CHAPTER 21

Maverick can't focus on anything but the watch, and Red notices. Red seems to get nervous; he gives Khalil back to Brenda and says he's going out for a bit. Maverick tries to follow him, but by the time he gets outside, Red is gone. Maverick heads for Mr. Wyatt's store, thinking that Red would've bought a stolen watch from Ant—but there was more to the look in his eyes. Maverick is so distracted at work that he drops a carton of eggs as he bags them for a customer. Mr. Wyatt scolds Maverick and says that he'll take two cartons out of Maverick's paycheck.

When the customer is gone, Mr. Wyatt asks what's going on. Maverick knows he can't tell the truth, so he just says he has a lot on his mind. Mr. Wyatt tells him to focus on one thing at a time until he reaches his goal, and he asks Maverick what his goal is. Maverick wants to buy a car and a double stroller, but Mr. Wyatt deems those things a to-do list. He asks what Maverick wants to do with his life, which no one has asked him since he was a kid. Back then, he wanted to be an astronaut or a veterinarian, but now he knows that all anyone can hope for around here is survival.

Mr. Wyatt pressures Maverick to tell him his dream. Maverick says he wanted to be like Pops when he was a kid, but that's not why he's in the gang—gang affiliation is necessary to survive. Mr. Wyatt points out that Carlos and Jamal are fine, and they're not in gangs, but Maverick says those two didn't have to be on the streets. In any case, everyone expected Maverick to be "Li'l Don" and join. Mr. Wyatt says that the apple might not fall far from the tree, but it can roll away if it gets a little push. Maverick grunts.

Shaking his head, Mr. Wyatt again asks what Maverick's dreams are. Maverick said he used to want to be a basketball player, but he and Mr. Wyatt both agree that's not possible given how poorly Maverick plays. Then, Maverick says that he thinks owning a business, like Mr. Wyatt does, would be cool. He might have a clothing or music store. Mr. Wyatt says that's a great dream, but Maverick needs a plan. He'll need to get his diploma or a GED and then attend some community college courses. Maverick will also need a business loan, and he'll be laughed out of a bank as a Black man with no education.

Maverick can't get it out of his mind that Red might have killed Dre. Given how loyal he is to Dre and how close they were, this isn't surprising. But the distraction causes Maverick to fumble eggs, which will lose him money out of his paycheck. In this way, Maverick is going to face consequences for being so unfocused on work and so focused on Dre and Red.



Mr. Wyatt has stepped into the role of Maverick's mentor, so he can tell that something is going on. Asking Maverick about his goals shows that he cares—it's especially meaningful given that nobody has asked Maverick about his future since he was a kid. This suggests that for many people in a poor neighborhood like Garden Heights, there aren't a lot of career options or other opportunities. As Maverick says, survival is the best people can hope for.



Maverick frames joining the King Lords as something thrust upon him. He didn't get to choose, and it seems like he's never given it much thought. But while Mr. Wyatt might accept that Maverick has been born into very particular and difficult circumstances, he also suggests that Maverick could overcome them if he wanted to. Maverick is, in other words, more in control of his life than he thinks.



Previously, Maverick thought that it seemed great how bosses, like Mr. Wyatt and Mr. Lewis, can stand around and talk while paying others to do the hard work. Now, by laying out how Maverick could go about becoming one of those bosses, Mr. Wyatt makes this seem within Maverick's reach. To quote Mr. Wyatt, Maverick just needs a little "push" to show him that this is possible, and to take the necessary steps to achieve this goal.



Maverick laments that school is hard enough to fit in as it is. Mr. Wyatt says that without school, he'll end up selling stuff like Red. Maverick is momentarily distracted, but then Mr. Wyatt suggests that he could leave Maverick in charge of the store for a few hours while he runs errands. It'll give Maverick a taste of his dream. Maverick's eyes go wide—Mr. Wyatt trusts him. He doesn't know Maverick is still working for him to keep his drug-dealing a secret from Ma.

Once Mr. Wyatt leaves, Maverick looks around. This is fantastic—there's no one to tell him what to do. Since he needs time to think, and Mr. Wyatt says that sweeping gives him time to think, Maverick grabs the broom. He wonders if maybe Ant didn't kill Dre, but then he has to stop thinking to help some bratty kids and an old lady. When the store empties again, he checks the aisles and then starts to clean the glass.

Then, P-Nut and three "big homies" park outside and come into the store. P-Nut teases Maverick about cleaning the windows and asks if he's Mr. Neat. When Maverick says it's Mr. Clean, P-Nut says he doesn't care about "technicalisms." As P-Nut grabs snacks, Maverick thinks that P-Nut should know about Red. But when he starts to bring it up, P-Nut says he doesn't want to talk about "operationalities." Maverick starts to ring up P-Nut's snacks, reminds him they don't take bills over \$50, and then says that he saw Red with Dre's watch.

P-Nut is unconcerned and insists that Red couldn't have killed Dre—he's weak, like Maverick. P-Nut tells Maverick to be grateful he's respecting Dre's wishes to keep Maverick out of it, or Maverick would be dealing now. When Maverick keeps pushing, P-Nut and the "big homies" give Maverick a threatening look. Maverick stays silent until they leave. Now, he's not sure he can depend on the gang.

CHAPTER 22

Maverick can't get Red out of his mind. At school, as he waits to meet with Mr. Clayton to discuss his "future," he thinks about Red—and about the fact that his future will probably include summer school. Mr. Clayton interrupts Maverick's thoughts and calls him into the office. As Maverick shakes the counselor's hand, he thinks of Mr. Wyatt saying you can tell a lot about a man by his handshake. Mr. Clayton's handshake is strong—he "don't take no mess." Maverick takes a seat and looks around at the framed portraits of "important-looking Black people," like Malcolm X and Huey Newton. Pops introduced Maverick to those men, but Maverick has never heard them mentioned in history class.

Mr. Wyatt recognizes that since Maverick doesn't seem to believe he could really be a business owner one day, it's important to give him tastes of what it's like, so that he continues to dream and work for it. But as Maverick realizes, this also shows that Mr. Wyatt trusts Maverick—he sees Maverick as more than a gangster.



Though Maverick is left on his own and has the ability to shirk his duties and play instead, he dives right into work. Further, he takes Mr. Wyatt's advice to heart—he needs time to think, so he does what Mr. Wyatt would do and sweeps. This shows that he's taking Mr. Wyatt seriously as a mentor.



P-Nut seems to look down on Maverick working in Mr. Wyatt's store. He sees tasks like cleaning the glass as beneath him and other gangsters—which is why he tries to insult Maverick by calling him Mr. Neat. But though P-Nut is rude and abrasive, Maverick still knows that he's the crown of the King Lords and, therefore, is someone he should be able to trust.



P-Nut's response lets Maverick know that there's no one to look out for him in the gang, now that Shawn and Dre are gone. P-Nut makes it very clear that the moment he gets tired of letting Maverick try his hand at honest work, he can force him to start selling again. This reminds Maverick that he also doesn't have any power within the gang.



Reflecting on Mr. Wyatt's advice about handshakes again shows how much Maverick respects and trusts him. Seeing men like Huey Newton and Malcolm X in Mr. Clayton's office also shows Maverick that there are some adults in the school who might think the way Pops does and want kids to learn about "important-looking Black people." But the fact that Maverick didn't learn about these men in his history classes shows that on the whole, the school isn't effectively supporting or inspiring its Black students.



Mr. Clayton pulls out a file folder and says he's heard Maverick has experienced some "life-changing developments." Maverick waits for Mr. Clayton to look at him like he's "trash" like other adults do when they learn he has two kids. But Mr. Clayton says he's here to help, not judge. Mr. Clayton notes that Maverick's grades have suffered, and Maverick replies that he's not dumb. Mr. Clayton asks why Maverick's grades don't reflect that and notes that some teen parents get good grades. He also says that this isn't something Maverick can fix with summer school—he's going to have to repeat 12th grade.

Maverick protests, but Mr. Clayton asks why he cares so much now, when he didn't care the rest of the school year. Maverick decides he *doesn't* care and stands up to leave, so Mr. Clayton says his other option is to get his GED. He passes Maverick a pamphlet about the GED program for adults—and Maverick realizes that he's not a kid anymore. A diploma or GED, Mr. Clayton says, will help Maverick provide for his kids. Maverick accepts the pamphlet, but he decides this is all pointless. He throws it away on his way out the building. Diplomas or GEDs don't seem to make life easier—Ma, for one, doesn't make enough money even with a diploma. It's time for him to focus on making money.

Maverick heads to King's apartment, where Iesha answers his knock. She says that King went to get breakfast, and she rubs her belly—she's pregnant, and this baby is actually King's. Maverick asks if she's trying to replace Seven, and Iesha retorts by asking if Maverick was trying to do the same thing when he got Lisa pregnant. She spits that she loves Seven and needs to see him more often.

King pulls into the drive, and Iesha huffs into the apartment. He greets Maverick, and when Maverick asks for more product to sell, King says he has a lot for him. King leads him inside and gives Iesha a McDonald's bag. She heads to the bedroom to eat, and King shakes his head. Maverick doesn't want to hear about how good King's new product is and he insists that nothing is wrong; he just wants product so he can leave. The boys argue about Maverick's behavior for a minute, and then King says that they're friends and asks what's wrong. Maverick realizes he has no one to talk to aside from King.

As soon as Mr. Clayton brings up the fact that Maverick has a son and a baby on the way, Maverick is on edge. He's so used to adults looking down on him because he's a father that it's hard for him to trust that Mr. Clayton won't be the same. So, because Maverick is already on edge, it's even harder for him to hear the bad news that he can't graduate this year. Now, it seems like he's been struggling at school for no reason.



Though Mr. Clayton insists that a high school diploma or a GED are the only avenues Maverick has to making money, Maverick sees things differently. He's watched Ma struggle for years now to keep the lights on with honest work and a diploma; clearly, education isn't always enough. When he says it's time to focus on "making money," it implies that Maverick is going to double down on drug-dealing. Maverick knows he can make good money that way—and without any education, that seems like his only option.



Iesha seems to genuinely want to have a family with King. Her new pregnancy makes an already complicated family situation even more complicated, especially since Maverick sees it as a slight against Seven. His priority is his son—and he sees Iesha's pregnancy as showing that she doesn't prioritize Seven the way he does.



Maverick is in such a bad mood because it seems like his life is falling apart again. He's not going to graduate, Iesha isn't going to have time for Seven, and Lisa still doesn't want to be with him. But King makes it clear that despite their differences and their struggles to connect over the last few months, he's still here for Maverick. Maverick isn't alone—he still has his friends.



With a sigh, Maverick says he can't graduate. King agrees that repeating 12th grade is a waste of time and counsels Maverick to focus on selling drugs—he'll be able to make more money that way. Maverick already knows this, but he thinks he also wants to keep his promise to Dre—selling drugs is only temporary for him. King assures Maverick that he's not upset, and Maverick feels stupid for thinking he was. As King digs into his fries, he asks what else is bugging Maverick. Maverick tells King he saw Red wearing Dre's watch, and that P-Nut didn't care. King and Maverick make fun of P-Nut, and then King asks if Maverick knows what this means. Maverick does: he has to kill Red.

King has already been out of school for a year, since the novel gives no indication that he enrolled elsewhere after being expelled last year. He's been doing well financially since getting expelled, so in his experience, school isn't a necessity. But Maverick again finds himself stuck between wanting to support his growing family and wanting to make Dre proud. Drugs might make him money—but he also realizes that drugs aren't a long-term solution to his troubles.



CHAPTER 23

Seven doesn't care about Red or about Maverick graduating—all he cares about is refusing to eat pureed peas and carrots. He keeps spitting the mush out, sometimes onto Maverick's face, and saying "Da-da-da." As Maverick tries to feed his son, he thinks about telling Ma that he can't graduate. If she kills him, he reasons, he won't have to worry about Red. Finally, as Seven offers Maverick a handful of baby food, Maverick decides to give Seven his favorite rice cereal. A bit later, Seven goes to sleep easily.

Because Maverick is so caught up in his plans to kill Red and having to tell Ma about school, he doesn't have as much energy to focus on Seven. But Seven's trying behavior forces Maverick to realize that first and foremost, he's a father to a small child who needs him. His other worries will still be there after Seven's been fed.



Maverick paces while he waits for Ma to get home and thinks that Ma can never find out he's going after Red. As Maverick's thoughts race, he realizes he needs proof that Red killed Dre before he does anything. Keisha was on the phone with Dre when Dre died; maybe she heard something. Maverick will see her this weekend, since she's meeting Maverick and Lisa for lunch after Maverick's Valentine's Day surprise for Lisa, the tour of Markham.

Maverick recognizes that it'd be foolish to go after Red without proof. He wouldn't, after all, be appropriately loyal to Dre if he killed Red for no reason. Juxtaposing these thoughts with the aside about taking Lisa to tour Markham shows that Maverick is being pulled in several directions. He's trying to balance gang affiliation, familial loyalty, and winning Lisa back.



Ma gets home and lets herself in quietly, but she greets Maverick when she sees he's still up. She asks how his conversation with Mr. Clayton went. Maverick wants to tell the truth, but instead, he tells Ma a half-truth: that Mr. Clayton told him what he needs to do to graduate. Ma says she has faith in Maverick and asks if the light bill came. Maverick says he paid it and the water bill already. Ma thanks Maverick for helping and asks about Seven. She chuckles when Maverick says he was naughty—she says it's payback for how Maverick was as a baby.

Maverick adores Ma and desperately doesn't want to disappoint her. So, it makes sense that instead of telling her the whole truth, he tells her that he's already taken care of the bills weighing on her mind. And talking about Seven once again keeps them focused things that are comfortable and low-stakes, which means Maverick can put off disappointing Ma.



Annoyed, Maverick gets up to go to bed, but Ma asks him to sit down to talk about something “long overdue.” Ma says she has a date for Valentine’s Day on Sunday, but it’s not with a man: it’s with Moe. They’ve been in a relationship for a few years, and Pops knows about it. Maverick is shocked. Ma explains that Granny knows but isn’t accepting, and Aunt ‘Nita knows too. She says that she’s always liked women, and Pops knew that from the beginning. Maverick thinks back to Lisa telling him to pay attention and realizes that Ma is always happier when Moe is around. He asks Ma if she loves Moe, and Ma says she does, her eyes sparkling.

Maverick asks if Ma loves Pops too. Ma explains that she’ll always love him, but she also needs to love and take care of herself. Pops’s life is at a standstill because he chose to sell drugs, and she shouldn’t have to compromise because of his decisions. Tears fill her eyes, so Maverick hugs her and tells her it’s okay. He asks if she’s happy, and Ma says she is, which is all that Maverick cares about. As Maverick holds Ma, he thinks that she’s right: they’re both living their lives while Pops is in prison, waiting on visits and calls. He realizes that he’s been horrible to Pops. Maverick heats up dinner for Ma and thinks that she deserves this moment of happiness. He doesn’t want to ruin it.

CHAPTER 24

For the rest of the week, Maverick tells Ma that he’s going to school, but really, he’s watching Red. Today, though, Maverick is getting ready to take Lisa to tour Markham. Ma lectures him about how to properly drive and care for her car. She asks if he needs gas money, but he doesn’t (the drug money has been life-changing).

Ma asks if he’s okay, since he seems like he has “a heavy heart,” but Maverick insists that he’s fine. Ma notes that someday, Maverick could go to Markham too. Maverick can barely look her in the eye. When Ma suggests that she just drive them herself, so she doesn’t have to worry, Maverick protests—but Ma tells him it’s normal for parents to worry about their kids. He’ll understand when Seven starts walking. Maverick asks if soon, he could borrow the car to visit Pops. Ma smiles and says she’ll set up a visit.

By coming out to Maverick and telling him about her relationship with Moe, Ma shows that she’s ready to treat Maverick like an adult. She expects him to respond kindly and appropriately—and though Maverick is shocked, he does. This also explains why Moe didn’t stop by over Thanksgiving: Granny was there, and she doesn’t approve of Ma and Moe’s relationship. Hearing that Ma is in love and happy also means that Ma is growing her own support network. Now, she doesn’t have to rely solely on Pops and Maverick.



Ma proposes here that just because Pops made certain choices doesn’t mean that she shouldn’t get to make choices of her own. For Maverick, this impresses upon him just how much Pops relies on him and on Ma to keep him feeling like he’s still involved in their lives to some degree. Pops’s life may be on hold, but that doesn’t mean he’s not part of the family.



Again, the aside that the drug money is “life-changing” speaks to how important it is to Maverick to be able to support himself and his family. Now, he can borrow Ma’s car without having to ask her for gas money, which likely makes him feel competent and in control.



Just like Mr. Wyatt, Ma can tell that something is wrong with Maverick. Suggesting that he could accompany Lisa to Markham suggests that a college education is Ma’s dream for him as well—but she doesn’t know yet that Maverick has dropped out of high school. Ma also shows Maverick that parenting doesn’t get any easier as the kids get older—parents still worry, just about different things.



By eight o'clock, Ma lets Maverick leave. Before he picks Lisa up, Maverick stops by where Red spends his mornings. Sometime today, King is going to get Maverick a gun—and hopefully, Keisha will confirm that Red killed Dre. At Ms. Rosalie's house, Lisa comes out, still mostly dressed for bed. She says the baby kept her up all night, and she puts Maverick's hand on her quivering stomach. They argue again about whether the baby is a girl or a boy, and Lisa says she wants extra sauce on her ribs when she wins the bet. Maverick helps her into the car, refuses to tell her where they're going, and heads onto the highway.

As Maverick drives through the suburbs surrounding the Garden, Lisa remarks at how different this is from the Garden. Maverick says it's too "sophisticated" and "bougie" for him, but Lisa asks what he'd do if he had a trillion dollars and could do anything. Maverick says he'd live on a private island, but he'd also rebuild the Garden and start a business so he could hire locals. He explains he'd live on the island so jealous people couldn't kill him. He offers to let Lisa come and decorate his mansion, and Lisa smiles.

Maverick asks Lisa what she'd do with that kind of money. She shrugs and says that she'd end world poverty and hunger, and then build a house like everyone else. As they drive past the suburbs, Maverick again refuses to tell her where they're going. Lisa opens the sunroof and tells Maverick to smell the air out here—it smells like pine trees. She puts her head back and quickly falls asleep. Maverick whispers to the baby to let Lisa stay asleep, and Lisa's stomach stops quivering.

The Markham campus is beautiful. Maverick wakes Lisa up as soon as they get there and tells her they're taking a private tour of the campus. She throws her arms around Maverick's neck and then fixes her hair. Maverick leads Lisa to the quad, where they're supposed to meet their tour guide. On their walk, Lisa reminds Maverick that he could go to college here too. Maverick is too nervous to tell her he can't graduate, so he reminds Lisa that this is her tour.

Their tour guide is Deja McAllister, a Black senior who's also pregnant. She's due with a boy in June, and she tells Maverick and Lisa that she and her husband are going to name him Justyce, with a y. They discuss Lisa's plans for a major, and Deja suggests that she look into nursing, since it doesn't require the time commitment that medical school does. Maverick keeps his mouth shut as the women discuss their pregnancy complaints. He also looks in awe at all the Black people, many of whom aren't much older than Maverick. Some of the guys could easily be Maverick, King, Junie, and Rico, and Maverick can imagine himself here.

Maverick makes it clear that he's not totally focused on Lisa and the Markham visit. On some level, he's going to spend the entire trip thinking about killing Red. The fact that Lisa is so willing to go on this trip with Maverick shows that she does trust him, and she might be more open to a relationship with Maverick than she lets on.



It's telling that although everything Maverick wants to do would benefit Garden Heights, he still fears that someone would kill him out of jealousy. This reflects his lived reality: successful people who help others, like Dre, get killed. But it also makes it clear that Maverick wants to help better his hometown, and he recognizes that poverty is the city's main problem.



Lisa would do much the same thing as Maverick if she had the money, but she'd do it on a much grander scale. In this way, she's thinking bigger than Maverick is. Pointing out how different the air smells outside the city also hints that Lisa wants to get out of Garden Heights. She, perhaps, doesn't feel that Garden Heights is the best place to raise her baby.



Lisa seems to believe, on some level, that Maverick could move on from the King Lords and attend college, if only he'd try. In other words, she believes he has more control over his life than he does. Maverick, though, feels like his control is lessening, especially now that he can't graduate high school.



Whereas Maverick sees the Black residents of Garden Heights struggling to get by, he sees the Black students at Markham thriving. This might suggest that the answer to the problems plaguing Garden Heights is education—but as Maverick has demonstrated, it's hard to focus on school when there's so much else going on that requires one's attention. But still, it's significant that Maverick could see himself attending Markham, as this could motivate him to apply himself to his education again.



Maverick lets himself imagine joining a fraternity until he gets the page from King notifying him that King got the gun. Markham, he thinks, isn't for drug dealers who flunk out of high school and kill people. The tour ends around noon, and then Maverick drives to a Chinese restaurant near campus. Inside, as Maverick looks for Keisha, Adreanna runs to him and asks where her "Sevy" (Seven) is. Lisa laughs. Maverick and Lisa follow Adreanna back to Keisha, who admits to helping plan the tour. She notes that she didn't realize Maverick and Lisa were back together. Maverick says they're not together—but he'd do anything for Lisa.

After everyone orders, Adreanna tells Maverick all about preschool and her boyfriend. Maverick jokes that he'll have to talk to this boy, and Keisha starts to say that he's as bad as Dre, but she stops and looks down. Keisha says she misses Dre—they should have been getting ready for their wedding now. Lisa excuses herself to the bathroom, and while she's gone, Maverick asks if Keisha remembers anything else about the night Dre died. He lies that the gang wants to find out who did it. With some coaxing, Keisha says that Bus Stop Tony had been nearby—and she could hear that the robber's voice was raspy, like Red's.

Maverick is too caught up in thinking about Red, Tony, and Dre to talk for the rest of the meal. Finally, Maverick helps Lisa into Ma's car. As he pulls out of the parking lot, Lisa asks what's wrong—Maverick is never quiet like this. He insists he's fine and asks if, after this surprise, Lisa will give him another chance. Sighing, Lisa says they're not getting back together.

Maverick angrily asks if he's going to get nothing for all of this, while Connor wins Lisa over with a teddy bear. Lisa snaps that she's not a "gold digger" like Iesha is and asks if he really thought he could convince her to have sex with him by doing nice things. She says the nice gestures don't matter when he's still in a gang and not doing anything with his life. Maverick snaps that she doesn't understand what life is like on the streets; he *can't* get out of the gang. Taking a beating that might leave him dead isn't worth it, and Junie, Rico, and King are his friends. Lisa snaps that someone has to think about their baby's future, and she's silent for the rest of the drive.

Maverick has a very specific idea of what kind of people go to college—and in his mind, he's not the kind of person who goes. But, importantly, this is a limitation Maverick has placed on himself—there's no rule barring him from pursuing higher education. Meeting Deja seems to have shown Maverick that college isn't just for those who stick to the straight and narrow path.



Keisha has gone through an immense loss—but the way she's able to open up to Maverick and Lisa shows that she isn't alone. This is also why Maverick asks about Dre's killer by noting that the gang wants to find out who committed the murder. This is a coded way for him to tell Keisha that she still has the King Lords' support, even with Dre no longer around.



Again, Maverick seems to think that he's entitled to another chance with Lisa, just because he's being nice to her. But he's quickly learning that this isn't how relationships work—Lisa gets to choose whether or not she's willing to tie herself to Maverick, regardless of how he treats her.



To Lisa, the fact that Maverick is willing to stay in the King Lords and deal drugs shows her that he's not prioritizing her and their baby, though he might think he is. She knows as well as Maverick that being in the gang is dangerous for them—indeed, at lunch, they were just discussing that Dre died because of his involvement in the gang. But Maverick isn't willing to consider that Lisa might have a point because, for now, drugs and gang affiliation are the only way for him to make money.



CHAPTER 25

Maverick thinks that he's worthless—he's hurt everyone who cares about him with his lies. But he has nothing to lose, so he might as well kill Red to avenge Dre. On Monday morning, Maverick searches the Garden for Bus Stop Tony. When he can't find Tony at any of his usual spots, Maverick heads for the White House, which is where all the neighborhood crack cocaine addicts hide out. As soon as Maverick enters, the stench overwhelms him. Even though Maverick has laughed at a lot of drug addicts and sold product to them, he doesn't feel like laughing now.

Maverick walks through the house and, on his way back out the front door, runs right into Tony on his way in. Tony freezes and then races away, but Maverick chases him and finally catches him on the corner. Tony assures Maverick that he didn't do anything, even though the police don't believe him. Maverick feels bad for Tony—who knows what the police did to him to try to get him to talk. Tony looks like he's still wearing the same clothes he was the night Dre died. Maverick asks Tony what he saw that night, but Tony asks for crack in exchange—Pops used to give him crack. In fact, he gave Tony his first dose. Maverick agrees but says Tony has to talk first.

Tony says he was down the street when he heard the gunshots. He saw the robber's car drive away; it was a red Impala, which is what Red drives. Instead of giving Tony drugs, Maverick pulls out a couple hundred dollars. He tells Tony to get a motel, food, and some new clothes with the money—he needs to clean up. Tony's eyes light up as he takes the money and walks away. Maverick watches him go, thinking that this is the first time in a while anyone has told him he's like Pops. It doesn't feel as good as Maverick wants it to.

CHAPTER 26

Maverick would've rather heard that Pops bought kids shoes, not that he got people addicted to crack. He thinks that one person's hero can be another person's monster—or father, in his case. But he also doesn't think he can judge, since he's plotting to kill Red. Killing Red will take away another kid's father, but it's the only way to get justice for Dre.

Though Maverick insists that he's worthless and that his actions don't matter, it's important to note that this isn't the case. Seven adores his father, and Maverick has two parents who love him—and will continue to love him, even if his lies come out. As Maverick ventures into the White House, he begins to see the consequences of dealing drugs. Not everyone he sells to are rich white people—some people are in very rough shape due to their addictions.



Maverick recognizes that because Tony is an addict, the police probably didn't treat him well at all. And Maverick again has to recognize the damage that crack cocaine can do to people's lives when he notices that Tony is still wearing the same clothes he was wearing months ago. Revealing that Pops gave Tony his first dose of crack shows just how long Tony has been using—at least a decade—and it shows how deeply Pops was involved in the local gang culture and drug scene.



Maverick wants to support the community, not make it worse through dealing, which is why he gives Tony the money. It's only a temporary fix, but it might help Tony be more comfortable for a short period of time. Being compared to Pops in his willingness to give out drugs sits uncomfortably with Maverick. It's an indication that Maverick doesn't want to be like his father—at least when it comes to dealing drugs.



Maverick's conversation with Tony is forcing him to face some uncomfortable truths about Pops—which, in turn, makes Maverick think more critically about his own choices. The acknowledgement that he'll be taking away Khalil's father by killing Red offers hope that Maverick will be able to offer Red mercy so that he can raise his son.



Maverick is at Evergreen Prison, waiting to see Pops. As he and the other visitors wait for the inmates, he watches mothers chasing their children around. Finally, the buzzer goes off and the inmates come in. Pops is one of the first inmates in. Neither he nor Maverick move to hug each other, so Maverick sits down and thanks Pops for seeing him. Pops says he'll always see Maverick and asks what's going on. Maverick looks up and thinks that Pops has every right to be upset—but it seems like he's more likely to say "I love you" than say he's angry.

Maverick apologizes for his behavior when he visited last, but Pops says that Maverick was right to call him out. He's willing to forgive and forget. Though he's not supposed to touch Maverick, he puts his fist out so Maverick can bump it. Then, Pops smiles and asks how Seven and Lisa are doing. Maverick says that Seven is crawling now, and he passes Pops a sonogram picture from Lisa's last ultrasound. He insists it's a boy, but Pops says to always listen to a woman's intuition—if Lisa says it's a girl, she's right. Then Pops asks about Ma. Maverick says that Moe might move in, and that Ma is happy and in love. Maverick feels like he's taking sides, but Pops assures Maverick that he and Ma will work this out.

Then, Pops asks what Maverick wants to talk about. Maverick has been trying to figure that out the entire drive; he thinks he needs Pops to tell him he's doing the right thing and "being a man." Nervously, in coded language, Maverick says that he found Dre's killer and that it was Red. When Pops asks if Maverick wants to deal with this, Maverick says he "know[s] the code," but that's not what Pops asked. Maverick remembers Dre slumped over the steering wheel and says that no one can get away with this, so Pops asks why Maverick is asking for permission. Maverick *does* want Pops's permission, but he knows he'll sound like a little kid. He stays quiet.

Pops says that he's been in Maverick's shoes, and that Maverick will never forget it. Maverick starts to cry, and Pops puts his hand on Maverick's cheek. A white guard barks at Pops, but a Latino guard tells the other guard to leave Pops alone. Pops quietly says that "Daddy's here," and Maverick sobs. He says the same thing to Seven all the time, but Maverick hasn't heard those words in years. Maverick sobs that Dre should be here, and that he has to do this for Dre. Pops smiles a sad smile and says he thought he had to do lots of things, but all he really had to do was be there for Ma and Maverick. And he failed to do that.

Pops demonstrates unconditional love by meeting Maverick and not acting upset about their last visit. Parents, Pops shows, can be angry with their children—but it's important to always show up and be there for them. In this sense, Pops is showing Maverick a different side than Maverick saw when he spoke to Tony. Now, he's seeing Pops as a father, not as a dealer and gangster.



It's significant that Maverick opens with an apology, since this is a sign that he's becoming more willing to take responsibility for his actions. He knows that he hurt Pops, and he therefore knows that it's his responsibility to make things right. Pops shows just how committed he is to working on his relationship with Maverick when he breaks the prison rules by bumping fists—Maverick is more important to him than following restrictive rules.



Pops seems to imply that by asking for permission, Maverick is showing that he doesn't truly want to kill Red. For Maverick, killing Red is part of the rules on the street—but it's unclear, to Pops at least, if Maverick actually wants to follow through. Asking Pops for permission, though, also reinforces that Maverick is still a kid. He still wants his father's approval and perhaps he even feels like a young, scared child as he faces such a huge decision.



Pops quietly admits here that he's killed someone before—and it's not an easy experience to live with. When Maverick starts to cry, it suggests that he's taking Mr. Wyatt's advice to heart. Now, Maverick feels more comfortable expressing his emotions and asking for support. And Pops, importantly, meets Maverick in this emotional moment and gives his son the support he needs. He also plants a very important seed for Maverick: that all Maverick ever has to do is be around for his family.



The Latino guard tells Pops to sit back, and Pops does. Pops tells Maverick that he's not going to give him approval or permission. Maverick has to become his own man and make this choice for himself—and he needs to make the choice he can live with. At this, the buzzer goes off, ending the visitation time. Maverick stands, and Pops pulls him into a hug. After a long time, Pops tells Maverick to take care and turns away quickly. Maverick notices that Pops is crying.

Pops suggests here that part of growing up and becoming a man means making one's own decisions. An adult, he implies, shouldn't have to ask their parent for permission—especially for something as drastic and life-changing as killing someone. Noticing that Pops is crying as he turns away shows Maverick that it was perhaps misguided to think that men shouldn't show their emotions.



CHAPTER 27-28

Two days after visiting Pops, Maverick is ready to kill Red. He's in his bedroom; Seven is fast asleep while Ma and Moe watch a movie. Maverick pulls his gun out of a shoebox and tucks it into his waistband. He plans to catch up to Red at the park—no one else will be there, since it's a Sunday night during basketball season. He's going to hide his face, shoot Red, and then toss the gun and his hoodie in the nearby lake. Then he'll move on with his life. Though Maverick reminds himself that he has a plan, his legs won't stop shaking. He dials Lisa's number but stops himself—she'd know something was up.

Maverick has presumably decided that killing Red is the right thing to do—yet he's clearly nervous and upset about the prospect of murdering someone. This suggests that Maverick might be pretending to be okay, when really, he's still struggling with this decision. It's also significant that Maverick thinks about his whole family as he prepares to go out—he knows that shooting Red will put him at risk of not being able to support them.



Maverick steps into the living room. Ma and Moe are watching TV and eating popcorn. Maverick asks if they'll listen for Seven while he takes Lisa some food; she's having pregnancy cravings. Ma and Moe agree, and Ma tells Maverick to be careful out there. That makes Maverick choke up. He considers kissing Ma's cheek, but that seems like an acknowledgement that he might not come back. That's not an option.

Ma's warning to be careful would be a normal thing to say under any other circumstances. But because Maverick is the only one who knows that he's heading out to kill someone, it seems even more significant. He has to be careful—or he might not make it back.



Maverick walks outside—it's so quiet tonight that the whole neighborhood will be able to hear gunshots or sirens. Maverick hopes that Dre can hear when he pulls the trigger. It's totally dark by the time Maverick gets to the park. He stares at the one working streetlight on the basketball court and thinks he can see himself, King, Shawn, and Dre not that long ago. It feels like that summer day was a lifetime ago.

As Maverick imagines younger self on the basketball court, it becomes clear how much he's grown up since that day. That day on the court represents a time of innocence, before Maverick knew he was a father and before he decided he needed to avenge Dre's death. He was a boy then; now, he's becoming a man.



Maverick watches Red whistle as he loads his merchandise into his car. He reminds himself he's meant to do this, wraps a bandana around his face, and pulls his gun out. The gun feels heavy and cold, like the feeling in Maverick's stomach—but there are rules on the street. They're not written down anywhere, but it's stuff everyone needs to know to survive. But if there was a book, the most important part would be about family, and the most important rule would be that you have to kill anyone who kills your family.

This mention of the rules on the street contrasts to the opening of the novel. Months ago, Maverick was a relatively innocent teenager trying to save face during a basketball game—now, he's trying to avenge Dre's death by killing someone. As Maverick has matured, his understanding of what the rules mean has changed. Now, he knows that family is more important than anything else.



Maverick comes up behind Red and puts his gun to Red's head. Shakily, Red says he'll give Maverick anything and that he has a kid. Maverick tells Red he should've thought about that before he killed "the homie" (he can't say Dre's name, or it'll give his identity away). He also notes that "the homie" had a kid, too. Maverick tells Red to take off the watch and give it to him, and Red complies. Red shakes, cries, and begs. Maverick prays that God will let him forget this and puts his finger against the trigger. He knows he can do it—he just has to be his father's son and squeeze. But "Even killers can get their prayers answered."

All three people involved here—Maverick, Red, and Dre—have or had children. Being fathers binds them together, and perhaps this will convince Maverick to not kill Red. Importantly, Maverick also shows that in this moment, he associates being his father's son with killing Red. He knows that Pops was many things—a dealer, a father, and a killer. But in this moment, Maverick feels he has to focus on the fact that Pops has killed someone in order to justify his actions.



CHAPTER 29

Maverick runs through the neighborhood, tears in his eyes. His gun is in his waistband, and he threw away his bandana a while ago. Red is "[g]one." He knocks on Lisa's window and she opens it with a frown. Maverick crawls through, hauls himself upright, and hugs Lisa while sobbing. She leads him to her bed and begs Maverick to talk. She assures him that Tammy and Ms. Rosalie are at church.

Saying that Red is gone implies that Maverick killed him—so Maverick's emotional state makes sense. Again, the simple fact that Maverick is so emotional right now suggests that he's taking Mr. Wyatt's advice to heart: he's willing to show his emotions and be vulnerable.



Swallowing hard, Maverick says he found out that Red—Brenda's boyfriend—killed Dre. Lisa's eyes go wide. Maverick says that he walked up to Red in the park and put a gun to his head. But he couldn't pull the trigger. Maverick thinks that now, he's worse than Lisa ever thought. Folding her arms, Lisa asks why Maverick didn't do it. Maverick says he thought of his Ma, his kids, and Lisa—he didn't know what they'd do if he got killed or arrested. Maverick sobs that he's a coward. Lisa says that Maverick is a man, not a coward, but Maverick points out that he let the guy who murdered Dre run away. That's not justice.

In Maverick's mind, he's done something awful by not following through and avenging Dre's death. But Lisa shows here that she defines manhood a bit differently. To her, being a man means being willing to show mercy and not take a life, even if killing someone might seem like the just thing to do. Making this choice, meanwhile, shows that Maverick is distancing himself from the gang its rules.



Lisa says that it wouldn't have been just for Maverick to throw his life away to kill Red. Maverick wants to laugh and says he just didn't want to put his babies through the pain of not having a father, but his life isn't worth much anyway. Lisa asks if he's saying his children deserve him, and Maverick says they deserve better. Lisa rubs her belly and says that she and the baby need Maverick to believe in himself. Maverick can't believe it. She seems to see a totally different Maverick than who he thinks he is, and he wants to be the person Lisa sees.

Pops has been in prison since Maverick was eight years old, so Maverick has gone almost a decade without a father around. He knows how difficult it is to grow up without a father, and he doesn't want to have to put his children through the same pain that he's gone through. By making this choice, Maverick starts to become more like the person Lisa sees.



Maverick thinks that Mr. Wyatt is right: the apple can roll away from the tree with a push. Maverick puts his hands on Lisa's belly and remembers Dre telling him that he cried the first time he held Adreanna. He cried because she was stuck with him for a father, and he wanted to be the father she deserved. Maverick gets it now. He has some things to deal with.

Thinking these thoughts while touching Lisa's pregnant belly indicates that Maverick realizes he needs to clean up his act so that he can be the best father possible. In order to properly honor Dre, he needs to show his kids that he cares about them—and that means making choices that are right for both him and his family in the long term.



Ma and Moe are fast asleep on the couch when Maverick gets home; he covers them in a blanket and then locks himself in the bathroom. There, he digs out his plastic bag of drugs. Maverick thinks that he might be nothing, but he doesn't want to sell drugs anymore. As he stands with the bag, Ma knocks on the door. Startled, Maverick fumbles the bag—and it falls in the toilet. The drugs start to melt in the water, and the cannabis floats on top. Ma asks if Maverick is okay, and Maverick tells her he's having stomach issues. He sticks his hand into the toilet to salvage what he can, dries the bag off, and sticks it in his pants.

After flushing and spraying some air freshener, Maverick opens the door and smiles at Ma. He awkwardly steps out and stands, frozen, outside the bathroom door. He prays she doesn't notice anything in the bathroom, but he's still there when she comes back out. Maverick says he just wanted to say goodnight and assures her he's fine. Tomorrow, he's going to tell her that he can't graduate.

Maverick goes to his bedroom and finds Seven standing up in his crib. When Seven bounces and reaches for Maverick, tears spring into Maverick's eyes. He picks Seven up and thinks that he's still terrified every time he holds him. Seven deserves everything—and even though Maverick is only “a gangbanging, high school flunk-out who only seventeen,” he's going to do everything he can for his son. He tells Seven that Seven saved him tonight, and he promises not to let his son down. Then he settles Seven back into his crib, stashes his drugs and his gun in a shoebox, and lies down. He has to tell King what happened to the drugs.

The sun is barely up when King pulls up outside. Maverick asked him to meet first thing, and he knows King is going to be angry about the drugs. It was several thousand dollars' worth of product, and King will probably beat him for that. If King and Maverick weren't best friends, Maverick might die for this. Maverick has no idea how he's going to pay King back, but he nervously slides into King's passenger seat and thanks him for coming. He puts the gun in the cupholder and says that Red didn't do it.

King says he needed to talk to Maverick anyway: he wants the two of them to take over the gang's drug operations, since P-Nut has no idea what he's doing. King says he has a baby on the way and needs to make a lot of money—but he dares any of the other “big homies” to come after “us.” Maverick fixates on the “us” and says he's out, but King says they can be like their daddies. But Maverick thinks that King's parents are dead, and Pops is in prison. He says that he's done selling drugs for good.

Even though Maverick insists that he's “nothing,” he shows that he wants to be more than that by getting out of dealing drugs. This suggests that Maverick is going to focus on making “clean money,” thereby honoring Dre. But when Maverick dumps some of the drugs in the toilet, it ominously foreshadows that getting out of dealing won't be as easy as just giving the product back. Maverick will, of course, have to account for the drugs he wasted.



Now that Maverick has made the choice to stop selling drugs, the thought of Ma finding out is suddenly even more anxiety-inducing. He knows he's already disappointed Ma and has more disappointment coming for her tomorrow, and he doesn't want to make the situation any worse.



Here, Maverick articulates his new goal: to do everything he can for Seven and Lisa's baby, no matter how much he's already messed up. For him, family is what really matters, and so it's important to him to be present and support his children. With this, the novel proposes that people always have the ability to choose something different and more fulfilling, even if they've already made mistakes.



Maverick knows he has a bit of leeway with King because they're close friends, but he still knows he could face consequences for flushing the drugs. The fact that Maverick is still afraid of a beating suggests that his friendship with King is only going to help him so much. At some point, this financial blow is going to outweigh the strength of their relationship.



King shows here that he and Maverick share many of the same concerns: King wants to keep dealing drug because he, too, has a baby on the way. But as Maverick thinks over King's proposal, he knows it's not something he can live with. Pops's imprisonment, and the fact that King's parents are dead, show Maverick that he can't trust dealing to get him where he wants to go in life.



King laughs, reminds Maverick he has a second baby on the way, and asks if he really expects to make it work with just his job at Mr. Wyatt's. He says this isn't the Maverick he knows and asks if Ma or Mr. Wyatt found out about the drugs. He suggests that Lisa, "that ho," found out. Maverick is enraged, but King just laughs and says that Maverick is "whipped." King throws his hands up and says he'll take Maverick's stash for now, but he knows Maverick will want back in soon.

Maverick passes King his half-full baggie and explains that he accidentally flushed half of it. King is so angry that he pokes the gun at Maverick's chest. Maverick growls at him to stop, so King cocks the gun and points it to the side. King says that Red probably did kill Dre, and Maverick just couldn't shoot Red. Maverick again tells King to stop pointing the gun at him, so King laughs, puts the gun down, and says that he's just messing with Maverick.

But Maverick doesn't think the person staring at him is his best friend. Their friendship has been strained since the DNA test, and it feels like Maverick is losing another brother. He promises to get King the money for the drugs, but King says tells him not to worry about it—Maverick will pay him back some other way. Maverick doesn't like the look in King's eye; he gets out of the car.

CHAPTER 30

Thanks to Mr. Wyatt, Maverick now knows that flowers, fruits, and vegetables can grow anywhere. When God made everything, he didn't put plants in garden plots—He just put them in the wild. As Maverick watches King drive away, he notices Mr. Wyatt's **roses** blooming and goes over to look. He lets himself into the Wyatts' backyard and admires blooms that are as big as his palms. Crouching down, Maverick tells the roses that some of them need some canes cut.

Mr. Wyatt comes out the back door and curses; he tells Maverick he can't be going into people's backyards this early in the morning. He pulls his robe tighter and says that Maverick is lucky he didn't have his pistol on him, which makes Maverick laugh. Maverick explains that he just stopped in to check out the blooming **roses**. Mr. Wyatt reminds Maverick that roses can bloom "in the hardest conditions." Maverick suggests they cut some of the dead-looking canes, and Mr. Wyatt says that Maverick is right—those canes won't help the roses grow. People have to do the same thing in their own lives, discarding anything that doesn't help.

On the night Dre died, Maverick jokingly said that Dre was "whipped." Now, Maverick doesn't find the term funny at all. He recognizes that the behavior King sees as something shameful is, in his understanding, really just being there for a girl he loves and for his future child. On the other hand, this shows that King prioritizes dealing over his relationships.



Though King says he's joking and laughs here, pointing the gun at Maverick is still extremely threatening. It makes it clear to Maverick that he and King aren't friends anymore—at least not unconditional friends. If Maverick wants to be King's friend, he has to play along with what King wants.



Even if Maverick recognizes on some level that it's better and healthier for him to not be around King anymore, that doesn't mean it's easy to realize that his friendship with King has fundamentally shifted. He knows he can't trust his best friend anymore, and this compounds the grief Maverick is already feeling for Dre.



The way that Maverick frames the beginning of this chapter suggests that he's taken Mr. Wyatt's advice to heart. Further, he also seems to accept that he's a lot like the fruits, vegetables, and roses Mr. Wyatt talks about. Maverick may have been "planted" in a difficult situation, but this doesn't mean he can't improve his circumstances.



Mr. Wyatt becomes a little more human and relatable in Maverick's eyes when he learns that Mr. Wyatt owns a pistol. This makes Mr. Wyatt look less naïve—he clearly feels the need to protect himself from the dangers of the neighborhood. As they discuss the canes, Mr. Wyatt suggests that people should think of themselves as being like roses. They can grow anywhere, even in the harshest conditions—but it's also important to examine the parts of one's life that aren't helping them to grow.



Mr. Wyatt straightens up and says that he and Mrs. Wyatt have been talking. Jamal is going to a four-year college soon, and they're going to need more help. So, they'd like to offer Maverick a full-time job, even though it won't make Maverick as much money as dealing drugs. Maverick cuts Mr. Wyatt off and says that "fast money lead to a fast end." Mr. Wyatt is shocked Maverick has been listening, but he says that he can start after he graduates if he wants.

Maverick takes a deep breath and admits that he flunked out, but he's going to get his GED. Mr. Wyatt takes a deep breath; Maverick can't tell if he's disappointed or not. But Mr. Wyatt suggests that Maverick head downtown, sign up for the GED classes, and then return to the store to start full-time. He reminds Maverick that Maverick needs to worry about Ma's reaction more than anything else.

Maverick heads home and tells Ma that he flunked out of school. She's angry and leaves for work without speaking to him. Maverick is glad Moe is there—she probably saved his life. Then, Maverick gets dressed to head downtown. Before he can leave, though, the phone rings—it's Pops. Pops asks if Maverick is good, and Maverick tells him that nothing went on. Pops takes a deep breath of relief. Maverick admits that he feels a bit like he let the family down, but Pops says that the family needs him.

Maverick says that his main goal is to be around for his family, but he's not sure he can do that as a King Lord. He thinks he wants to get out of the gang. Pops is silent. Maverick starts to justify his thinking, but Pops interjects that he doesn't need an explanation. He says that lots of grown men don't want to be in gangs anymore, but they end up stuck because they're too afraid of what people think. Maverick wonders if Pops is describing himself. Pop continues and says that the fact Maverick can voice that he wants to leave shows that Maverick is thinking for himself, like a man. He says that people should call him Big Mav instead of Li'l Don, and he tells Maverick he loves him no matter what.

Signing up for GED classes isn't too bad; Maverick is going to be in classes with "kids" 19 and under. Nobody has called Maverick a kid in a while, and he wants to enjoy it—he won't be a kid anymore when he has two kids of his own. In addition to the GED classes, Maverick also signs up for some landscaping classes so he can get a certificate along with his GED. Then he gets the bus back to Mr. Wyatt's and works the register while Mr. Wyatt hangs out with Mr. Reuben and Mr. Lewis across the street.

Maverick has been listening—that's why he chose to come into Mr. Wyatt's garden in the first place after saying goodbye to King. He realizes that Mr. Wyatt's advice, though sometimes annoying and hard to hear, is wise and necessary. Meanwhile, being offered a full-time job offers hope that Maverick will be able to make ends meet, even without the drug money.



When Mr. Wyatt doesn't react poorly to Maverick admitting that he flunked out, it again shows that he takes his role as Maverick's mentor seriously. Once again, he realizes that Maverick needs support right now—not to be yelled at. He also notes that Ma is going to yell at Maverick anyway, so it's not something he needs to do too.



When Maverick is happy that Moe was there to protect him from Ma's wrath, it shows how well Maverick is adjusting to his growing family and community. Though he may still have confusing feelings about the relationships between Ma, Pops, and Moe, he nevertheless trusts that all three of those people are going to be there for him when he needs them.



It's a mark of how much Maverick and Pops's relationship has changed that Maverick feels at all comfortable telling Pops he wants out of the gang. This shows Maverick is, as Pops has said before, becoming his own man. And importantly, Pops makes it clear that growing up and becoming an adult means realizing that choices like this always exist. It's brave, Pops insists, to be willing to make them—and most men don't. Finally, Pops's suggestion that Maverick should be called Big Mav signals that Maverick's process of growing up is complete. Now, he has his own identity, separate from Pops's.



Even if Maverick is grown in Pops's eyes, he's still a kid according to the GED classes—and Maverick now realizes this is a privilege he's not going to be able to enjoy for much longer. Soon, he's going to have even more responsibility with his and Lisa's new baby in addition to Seven. Now, he understands why Ma always told him to enjoy being a kid: he's going to miss it one day.



Maverick works diligently through the midday rush, and when the rush is over, Mr. Wyatt returns. Maverick asks if Mr. Wyatt didn't think he'd survive—and with some prodding, Mr. Wyatt reveals that he, Mr. Reuben, and Mr. Lewis all bet that Maverick wasn't going to make it more than 10 minutes without help. But they all lost. Mr. Wyatt says that Maverick surprised him, and he's also surprised Maverick hasn't gotten his third strike yet. Maverick thinks that he's surprised too, but it seems like it's time for him to start surprising himself.

Maverick shows himself and Mr. Wyatt that he can handle whatever life throws at him—even though people are going to underestimate him. And in this moment, Maverick also realizes that he can't underestimate himself anymore. He may have made mistakes, but now he's committed to doing everything in his power to make good decisions—and through doing that, he should be able to surprise himself.



EPILOGUE

Lisa eats her barbecue at Maverick's kitchen table, smacking her lips loudly. She says, "I told you so." She's been insufferable since Dr. Byrd told them that they're having a girl, and she's since told everyone in town that she won their bet. Maverick insists he's fine with having a girl. They admire the sonogram picture.

It's unclear if Maverick was actually emotionally invested in having a boy, or if he clung to insisting it was a boy so he could continue this argument with Lisa. Regardless, it seems to have brought them closer together, as they're enjoying a meal and looking at the sonogram picture together.



Then, Lisa asks how Maverick's GED classes are going. He says that he likes them, especially his landscaping class. It's hard being away from his friends, though. Lisa asks if Maverick has told his friends what he told her yet, but Maverick says he has to work up the nerve to admit he wants out of the gang. He still owes King money, and getting out is going to cost him. But he promises he's going to make it all work.

Even if Maverick has decided he'd like to leave the gang (and has presumably told Lisa), that doesn't make it an easy decision. Maverick is still going to have to leave his friends behind—it seems unlikely that King will allow Maverick to maintain his friendships with Junie and Rico after leaving the gang.



Soon, Ma gets home and asks what the baby's sex is, and Maverick says that Lisa won the bet. Ma is thrilled and asks if they've come up with a name yet. Maverick suggests they name the baby Mavericka and insists it's no different than Dre naming Adreanna after himself, but Ma and Lisa refuse. Ma grabs a bottle of wine—she's not heading to her second job, since Moe is going to move in soon and help with bills. Maverick tells Ma that he'll get his own place soon, and then things won't be so hard for her, but Ma kisses his cheek and says he doesn't have to go anywhere—but they can worry about it later.

When it becomes clear that Maverick and Lisa can't name the baby after Dre or after Maverick, it means they'll come closer to following Pops's earlier advice on naming: to name their daughter in such a way as to show her who she can be. The aside that Moe is moving in and is going to alleviate some of the family's financial difficulties offers hope that going forward, Maverick won't have to resort to dealing drugs to support his family.



Maverick grabs Seven out of his highchair and asks Lisa where she wants to live. As Lisa feeds Seven barbecue sauce off her finger, Maverick says that he's willing to bet that Lisa will marry him one day, even if he lost their last bet. He's willing to do the work, and now, he has a plan to be an entrepreneur and show her he's dependable. Lisa says they'll see about that, and she sighs that Tammy needs to do her hair. Maverick asks to do it; he'll need to practice anyway, if they're going to have a girl. He wants to be involved with everything. Lisa agrees.

Maverick's plan now contrasts greatly with earlier in the novel, when he insisted that all anyone in Garden Heights can hope for is to get by. Now, he's taking steps so that he can be a business owner like Mr. Wyatt, showing how much of an influence the man has had on him. And when he insists that he needs to learn how to do hair so he can be there for his daughter, he shows Lisa that he's not going to make her be a parent on her own. Being a father, to him, means being there for Lisa and his daughter.



Maverick puts Seven to bed and then joins Lisa on the porch. It's the first warm night they've had in a while, and the sky is clear. Maverick pulls the comb through Lisa's hair, but when she protests, he combs more gently. They discuss that they need to come up with a name. Maverick asks who they want their little girl to be. He gave Seven his name because to him, Seven is perfect. Maverick asks what their girl is going to be to them. Lisa says she's going to be a good thing amid all the bad, and Maverick agrees. Lisa leans back into Maverick, and Maverick looks up at the twinkling stars. He says he has a name.

Readers familiar with Angie Thomas's previous novel [The Hate U Give](#) will remember that the protagonist—Maverick and Lisa's daughter—is named Starr. Here, the novel shows what Starr means to her parents. In essence, she's a beacon of light, much like a star in the night sky: she's what helped Maverick decide to get out of the gang and stop dealing drugs. With this, the novel reiterates the importance of loyalty to one's family, as well as the fact that family can motivate people to better their lives.





HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Brock, Zoë. "Concrete Rose." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 5 Mar 2021. Web. 5 Mar 2021.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Brock, Zoë. "Concrete Rose." LitCharts LLC, March 5, 2021. Retrieved March 5, 2021. <https://www.litcharts.com/lit/concrete-rose>.

To cite any of the quotes from *Concrete Rose* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Thomas, Angie. *Concrete Rose*. Balzer + Bray. 2021.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Thomas, Angie. *Concrete Rose*. New York: Balzer + Bray. 2021.