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Chapter Four  
**MIGHT AS WELL BE KING KONG**

Its alumni know Chicago's juvenile detention center as the "House of Screams." If you weren't street hardened when you entered, you became bait for the sharks. On the first full day of our visit to Audy Home, Randy was released. At the time I took that personally believing Florence or Gilbert collected him, leaving me behind. While it was actually his parole officer, I again felt purposely rejected, unwanted, disowned. But this was a different situation. I was no longer a little boy and this was no one's fault but mine. Were I the parent rather than the child, I'm not certain I would have done any differently. But the impact was significant in that moment. My file or "jacket" had me listed as Joseph Gregory Markko AKA [also known as] Kedrick Joseph Gregory. Though Gilbert and Florence had officially adopted me, I couldn't tolerate the thought of being rejected again. When told to make up my mind and tell them which of the two I was I said, " I'm Kedrick Gregory." At that time I'd never even seen a picture of the man and had no positive feeling about him. Claiming that name was a very low moment for a very lost kid. Becoming the poster child for the "if you can't love me, you will at least pay attention to me" campaign, I soon discovered that kind of self pity never gets you anywhere good.

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Sentenced to an unspecified amount of time in the State's "Reform" School, one hour west of Chicago, I would probably remain until at least my eighteenth birthday, a year and a half away. Though segregated in their own sections, juvenile felons made a mandatory stop at Joliet Prison's Stateville Correctional Center, as in *Blues Brothers*, without the comedy. Sent to Joliet for psychological analysis to determine my placement within the penal system, I was subjected to a 30-day battery of tests and interviews. Answering true or false to input such as, "My urine is black" or "Someone is out to get me," caused me to wonder what asylum I'd landed in. Randy and I hooked up again in Joliet. Taking five weeks to catch up with me, I told him a truly dedicated criminal could have done it in half that time. Three weeks later, with legs shackled and hands chained to a leather belt padlocked around our waist, we shuffled off the bus and into the Illinois State Training School for Boys just outside St. Charles, Illinois. Already three months in the penal system, this was going to be home for only God knew how long. Deep move, Joe.

Sitting on 125 acres along Route 38, the Illinois Youth Commission's facility at St. Charles was surrounded by two chain link fences. Topped with rolls of razor wire, the two fences are separated by a distance sufficient to allow patrols of men or dogs. To read the material on the website of the Illinois Department of Corrections, you would think the institution was a vacation spa. "The Leisure Time Activity Department provided recreational activities, including basketball, volleyball, billiards, ping-pong, weightlifting, soccer, track, softball, football, video games, birthday parties, movie videos, dominos, checkers, chess and picture programs." Are you kidding me? The person who wrote that for the State of Illinois deserves a raise. Either that or imprisonment. The truth about ISTSB is more accurately observed in the roots of Chicago gang life as detailed by the Chicago Crime Commission in 1995.

"The Vice Lords (VLs) (Alliance: "People") membership is predominantly African-American. The oldest, and second largest, street gang in Chicago was formed in the late 1950s as a club in the *Illinois State Training School for Boys* at St. Charles, Illinois. As several "club" members were released, they relocated to the Lawndale area of Chicago. The Vice Lords and its many factions are

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heavily involved in narcotics dealing and extortion of money from independent drug dealers; murder, drive-by shootings; robbery; theft; weapons violations; battery; assault; and intimidation; in a word, the entire spectrum of criminal endeavor." <sup>i</sup>

That's more the culture of the St. Charles I knew. Though identified by the law as juveniles, there were people here you needed to take seriously. When unfortunate members of the archrival, Blackstone Rangers arrived in this Vice Lord incubator, things got real interesting. The Deputies earned their keep.

Laid out like a microcosmic city, the area known as the "general population grounds" is divided by small, tree-lined streets into a community of large, brick buildings. The "cottages" housing the inmates were three-story monoliths named after U.S. presidents. McKinley, Buchanan, Adams, and others housed children segregated, as much as possible, into age-range groups.

The first floor of each building was actually the basement and called the Day Room. The outer wall of this area, painted an institutional gray, was lined with chairs providing the anchor for most of our non-working, non-sleeping hours. Toilet facilities and showers were separated from the activity area by a very low wall. If you were concerned about defecating or taking a shower in front of people who might want to rape or otherwise harm you, this was going to be a long ordeal. There is no escaping terror when it sleeps in the cot next to you or sits in the chair to your right. Life demanded you change from the moment you walked through the gate and if you didn't take control of "your space" somebody else would. The third floor is where we slept, filing nightly by guards who checked our orifices for contraband before allowing us to bed. At least that's what they told us they were doing. The first floor was kitchen, dining area and T.V. room. Allowed to watch some television on weekends, this was also the room where you waited for visitors on Sunday. And waited and waited and waited.

The occasional visiting day was like a family reunion at the ISTSB. The three Markko brothers were here for being general nuisances, some of our adventures potentially more life-threatening than others. Though

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each arrived at varied times for varied crimes we spent several months together. While Matt was in a farm cottage outside the fences, Randy and I saw each other daily as we assembled for head counts in the Detail Hall. In a short period of time, each of us became identified as "the Man" in our respective environments. At least as far as the "white boys" were concerned. Both of us also managed to ferret out ways to get ourselves thrown in "the box," technically called the "Special Treatment Unit." Imagine that. You're in jail, struggling to get as far up the food chain as fast as you can, and there's someplace else to get locked up. Jail, inside of jail. There's no future in that but general nuisances are what we were, the entire brood. We weren't controllable, even in jail. It would require an unusual person to bring control to lives like these and it wasn't going to be Mr. and Mrs. Woods.

As house parents of Hayes cottage, they were a retired couple who spent most of their adult lives working for state government. At this stage of their existence the rehabilitation or reclamation of foolish, wayward boys was of secondary concern to them. They wanted peace and a supplemental paycheck. With a fixed goal of maintaining order among 30, convicted felons they were indifferent to our respect or admiration. They were after quiet compliance: no fights, no profanity, no resistance, ever. Anything short of that brought Mr. Tanner to the door.

Humanosaurus Rex, Mr. Tanner was a battle-baptized street messiah serving the state of Illinois as Head Deputy of the institution. With the longest arms and biggest hands I've ever seen, he had a way of making you feel like he was 20 feet tall and earnestly looking for something to fall on. Among his more sobering traits was his ability to move like a ghost. You never saw it coming. Upon deciding that severe, facial stimulation was the remedy, the heel of his hand collided with one side of your head and his fingers wrapped "clean round" to the other. He got your attention, real fast and if he removed you from the cottage you weren't coming back for a while. A long, circuitous car ride took you to the box. If you were real lucky you got out of the car in the same condition you entered. Mr. Tanner didn't play.

The Day Room was boring and far too constricting. Looking for a way to make this pay, I took the job of working in the linen room. Inmates were given clean prison issue once a week. Some of those outfits had been

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recycled for decades and some were brand new. You could tell my friends and enemies from the clothes they wore. Gangsters like to look good and I started making the right friends, particularly on the black side of the room. You can't knock everybody out so you earn respect and create alliances. The linen room was large and accessible to the day room via a Dutch door. A world of its own, we had our own radio and lockers for each inmate, providing a great place for stashing contraband, cigarettes, drugs or alcohol brought in by visitors or purchased outside the fence while on work detail. Providing unviewable recesses from the Day Room, we "popped a socket" to light our illegal cigarettes when we ran out of matches. Popping sockets involves rolling a small piece of steel wool between your fingers until it's roughly the size and shape of a toothpick. Wrapping that in a few layers of toilet paper, you stuck it into an electrical outlet. The resulting spark ignited the toilet paper and you were in business. Unfortunately, it also blew out some fuses. "Markko, Mr. Tanner is here to see you." He was about to apply some incentive to help me quit smoking.

Losing my job in the linen room, I took a job working in the kitchen of the cottage. The kitchen had a small, walk-in pantry, not visible unless a person walked across the kitchen and stood directly in front of the door. An old building, the baseboard molding was about six inches high. Removing a piece of the molding we punched out the wall along the floor and hid contraband by connecting a string and dropping it into the wall itself. Replacing the molding hid the hole. Lighting a cigarette broken in half for conservation, I saw the shadow of Mrs. Woods moving like a storm across the kitchen. Busted. Mr. Tanner and I were getting close.

Monday through Friday inmates attended school or worked. As one of the older kids in the institution, school wasn't mandatory and I was able to choose a work detail that paid 25-50 cents an hour. I tried my hand at working for the sanitation department on the garbage trucks but I didn't care for it. A brick mason's job is what I chose next. Didn't care for it. I would've opted for Indian chief but it wasn't on the list, so how about a barber?

Mr. Satterly's six-chair barbershop was a coveted place to work. A licensed training school for barbers, inmates could actually earn their

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certification while here. As important to us was the fact that institutional rules required all inmates to keep their hair cut. That meant everyone in the institution came through our chairs. Sounds like another possibility for leverage. We traded "illegal" haircuts for cigarettes, cash or drugs. If they treated us right, we'd cut them some "lines." If they treated us wrong, their own momma wouldn't recognize them from their haircut. If they didn't like it they could jump out of that chair, get on their toes and "throw." This wasn't a cruise ship and getting angry with a felon holding a straight razor or a sharp pair of scissors could be cost prohibitive. The chair closest to the door was the First chair and the most senior inmate-barber laid claim to it. The pecking order was established from there. Chairs one and two were Hardy and Arbuckle who also happened to be the indisputable men of our entire planet. They were 18-year-olds in 28-year-old bodies. Chairs three and four were Markko and Garcia, with two "short timers" who changed regularly down at the end. I was doing the best I could to make my time work for me. If you've got to be a monkey you might as well be King Kong.

After nine months incarceration, my prospects for a reasonably early parole were looking grim. My parents didn't want me and the neighborhood took up a petition against Independent Parole, available for those approaching 18 years. You mean, they didn't like me? I was stuck. Think, depressing. Then, a visitor arrived. It was non-standard visiting hours so I knew it unusual. It was one-legged Larry from Ohio. Hoping he might help and stressing the future's uncertainty, my family informed him of my situation. Offering to let me live with his family, I was feeling desperate and didn't imagine the State of Illinois would allow an out-of-state parole to a non-family member. But it happened and I was on a Greyhound bus headed for Cleveland with a new pair of work boots and suit provided by the gracious State of Illinois. The only other things I owned were a check for \$125, earned and saved while in jail and a very unclear idea of my future. I was 17. For all intents and purposes I left home when I was 15 and never made it back.

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<sup>i</sup> Juvenile Offenders and Victims [1999 National Report](#)