PROLOGUE

This book is my record of Kevin Davis and Karen Tanuki’s lives during this period. The scenes and analysis are based on events I have either observed or have had described to me in multiple interviews, wherever possible cross-referenced with public records. I have recreated some conversations based on the recollections of the participants. Kevin Davis’s name is his own. Many other names in the book, including those of Karen Tanuki and her children, have been changed in the interest of privacy.

This book attempts to provide an authentic account of one recent trend of the African-American experience, the interplay of the big-city former gangster with small-town America. Finally, this book tries to reveal what it means to be Kevin Davis and Karen Tanuki, together, struggling to raise a family while the economies of central New York State and the country crumble around them.

SHORT TO THE STREET

September 2000. Kevin Davis pauses in the shower area of I Block at the Elmira State Correctional Facility in central New York State. His gaze is aimed through a square of morning light out a tiny open window toward a distant hill. Davis stares through the opening for a full minute before he moves beyond the shower room back to his second-tier cell. Two hours later, a guard at the foot of the tier announces raking leaves. The sound of metal on metal approaches, a sequence of opening locks, banging louder and louder as it travels down the row. The top lock of Davis’s cell pops and the gate opens a few inches. The noise fades, growing softer as locks down the line spring open in succession.

"On the show," a guard shouts. It is noon mealtime. Davis rushes the sliding door of the way open and steps out into a single file of inmates. Face down the line at the polished concrete floor now, he moves forward with short sliding steps to a flight of stairs down to the first floor, where the forty-two residents of the cell block stand to the left of a thick yellow line painted on the floor. The inmates pause and begin their ten-minute walk to the mess hall.

As they troop forward, dressed in green state-issued shirts and pants, some immaculate and sharply creased, others rumpled, these men have characters as varied as their archived fingerprints. Still, the inmates look remarkably alike. Almost all of the I Block inmates are either black or Latino. They
are all young and raggedly built. The small-boned and most of the whites have long since been herded into protective custody by entertainers. Among the company of menomorphs, Kevin Davis stands out. He is the darkest-skinned man in the hallway and, at five feet four, 167 pounds, the shortest. His bisected are swollen like gorged phalanges.

Like others high in the prison pecking order, Davis has little interest in the fifteen-minute mess hall meal. He has been "living good" as the inmates say, eating macaroni and tuna fish from the prison commissary in his cell. Today he is headed to the mess hall to nod hello across the wide stainless steel tables and check for new faces. Lately, ever since he was placed temporarily in E Block and discovered that from his cell he could see through a layer of greene-coated Plexiglas to the city of Elmira and the forest beyond, Davis has been obsessed by views.

1 Block faces the inside of the prison, so Davis can't see the hills from his cell anymore, but he can capture the view from the shower area and another, even better location. Later that afternoon, in the visiting room, Davis looks over his victim's shoulder and through the call decorative windows that open onto the steep hills that ring the prison.

A mucky sky hangs above ranges of oak, red and silver maple, beech and pine trees, many shades of green in the bright autumn sun. Much closer, down the sharp slope at the front of the prison, just a hundred yards away, cars move down a street and make careful turns. The tableau is so orderly, so picturesque, that Davis is tempted to shake his head and reflect. Instead, he drinks it in. There are no people, just the occasional automobile sliding between the Norway spruces. No sounds of black garbage bags heaped on the sidewalk, no sound of whooping sirens, just a silent, soft landscape of peace.

Kevin Davis is thirty-one years old. He has been incarcerated for seven years, lurching through the upstate New York prisons system like a journeyman professional baseball player. He has been moved from one institution to another because of incidents with guards or fights with other prisoners or another flare-up in the slow-motion war between Latino and black gang members at the Dannemora maximum-security prison in New York. for the Puerto Rican and Dominican inmates refused to keep onto the exercise yard when he was outside. Here in the Elmira prison in 2000, the New York State Correctional Officers and Police Benevolent Associations, in a contract negotiation with the state, used a videotape of Davis slashing an inmate named Andre Lopez and then dodging guards through the vast mess hall as proof they deserved a better deal.

Other times, Davis has been moved because he was listed as a "known enemy" of another inmate at a prison. Someone with an old beef put his name in the paperwork perhaps because of a razor scar from a jailhouse "barbed" or "gun" terms inmates use for various types of improvised knives, that Davis had wielded. Davis was never told who the complainant was or even that he had been fingered. Just, "Pack it up," and he would be on a green and blue minibus headed down a strip of highway to another maximum-security prison.

There is no shortage of penitentiaries in the forests of rural New York State. Davis has been in ten maximum-security prisons since his arrest in November 1993. In the last three years he has ridden the Department of Correctional Services buses between Wende, Greene Haven, Attica, and Elmira.

In 1994 and 1995, Davis was sentenced on a number of charges, the most serious being criminal possession of a weapon in the third degree, or "aggravated weapons possession," in connection with the gruesome murder of an Essex County man in the Brownsville neighborhood of Brooklyn. On the ninth day of October, 1993, at 1:42 p.m., a teenager named Dwayne Reynolds was shot nineteen times with an assault weapon, a Heckler & Koch HK94 automatic rifle. Police officers had been advised by supervisors not to respond to calls from 10 Amboy Street unless and until there was a "call back," confirmation from the dispatcher that the call was not an attempt to lure officers to the location so they could be bombarded with heavy objects from the roof. Uniformed cops finally did answer the call reporting shots fired. When detectives arrived, they scooped up the nine-millimeter bullets where they lay flattened after bursting through the victim's body and gouging small holes in the cement sidewalk. The Daily News carried an account of the murder five weeks later under the headline "It's So Easy to Die for So Little in N.Y."

Brownsville is in what detectives call the "Brooklyn North Triangle," where the investigators claim witnesses, victims, and perpetrators are often known to each other and thoroughly interchangeable. Two of the dozens of people who witnessed the killing made statements identifying Kevin Davis...
as the shooter, but neither was willing to testify, so police couldn't prove their suspicions that Davis had committed the murder. The Kings County DA settled for his guilty plea to the weapons possession charge.

But on the streets of Brownsville and in the abode of the New York State prison system, Davis is known as Killaree or KKK, not only because it was his real name in a short, professional boxing career, but because of what happened on Ambrose Street.

Davis has carried the Ambrose killing the way someone in the outside world would carry a degree from Harvard. The manner of the murder made him prison royalty at Rikers Island—or, for him, House of Deadly Men, an old name some inmates still call the New York City jail. Ambrose Street placed him above the petty harassment and ritual testing most inmates undergo at Rikers.

There were more than a few killers with multiple bodies to their credit in the state system, so the Ambrose murder didn't count as much when he went up north. But Davis had other advantages. In an exercise yard full of hundreds of men, he could read subtle indicators of status or hostility at a glance. If an inmate so much as squeezed in his direction, flinched at the touching of hands, tensed during the ritual bear hug, Davis would make it a point to pass again very close to the potential enemy or do hundreds of push-ups or sets of tennis pull-ups in his presence. Perhaps Davis would just think. We just know we have something to work out, his look would say, and we'll do it soon.

Such is the symbology of race in America that Kevin Davis's uncompromisingly black skin was also an advantage in prison. His complexion made him appear angry and dangerous, even in the eyes of maximum-security inmates. It seemed obvious to them that Kevin Davis was no pimp, con man, or hustler. If he had been part of a drug operation he had to have been the muscle. What they saw was a thug among thugs.

Early in his sentence, Davis quickly became close to notorious inmates, prison stars like Willie "King Tut" Johnson, the first person in New York State to be sentenced to life in prison under the 1990 three strikes law. Tut was famous for supposedly having shot Tupac Shakur five times in a midtown Manhattan robbery: starting the East Coast-West Coast rap war. "When I got popped, I got a kite from the paca that told me Tut got knuckled," 50 Cent rhymes in "Many Men," a cut on his 2003 album Get Rich or Die Tryin'. If no body "stepped to," or confronted, Kevin Davis in most any prison, volunteers eager to gain his approval were ready to step in and make his fight their own.

Such anas has its responsibilities. In the past seven years Davis has led prison skirmishes and even started a small riot at Attica, attacking a corrections officer in retaliation for a near-fatal beating by guards of a Greek inmate, a fellow Blood. But that is all in the past. There is nothing left to prove now, to himself, to the long-terms, or even to the legions of follow-up and parole. Nothing left to focus his thoughts on but the real world. He is just over two months to the street. What of the future? Get back to Brooklyn and do it all again one more time, but bigger and better?

Davis has learned things about himself in prison. He has tested himself physically. But that is nothing new. He has fought with outdoor vitality since he was old enough to slip away from his mother's sixth-floor apartments on Blake Avenue in Brownsville. Kevin Davis has long known he could be ferocious. But over the past seven years he has learned just how smart he is. He read the prisoners' bible, Robert Greene's guidebook to personal ascendancy. The 48 Laws of Power, then studied the factors in a hundred prison formulas and every time solved the equation.

Now that it seems as if he might actually find himself back on the street, he has identified the relevant facts. Providence alone has kept him from receiving a life sentence. Ambrose Street should have kept him in jail until his eyes were dim and his body reeking from some kind of cancer. But it didn't happen that way. He is going to find himself back in the world while he is still a young man.

Kevin Davis gazes out the wall of windows at the long-turning hawks above the painted perfection of Elmira and makes a simple vow not to return to Brooklyn when he is released. He knows he is a long shot to stay out of prison. Drug-dealing is not an option. With his record, Davis understands state law mandates that with one more felony conviction he can, like his friend Tut, be hit with a sentence that makes you eat at life.

But going back to prison is for men with no vision and no self-control. In prison, Davis has not only learned how smart he is, he has also learned how disciplined he can be.

He isn't impressionable or impulsive or lazy. He doesn't need fancy clothes.
and jewelry to maintain his self-esteem. Why go back to Brooklyn and the old life, with the lingering beasts, the constant emergence of young goons! Why dodge bullets, duel with razor blades, and box with brigandos, hustlers, and fools? When and if he gets out of prison—nothing is certain—he will stay away from Brownsville, move to the very street he can see from his prison window, walk quietly and confidently in a new world with brand-new challenges. He will relocate to Elmiras and not only sample the good life but master it. He is so proud of what he has overcome in prison, precautions confrontations like that beef he had with King Allah in 2000, attentions he had controlled and survived, that he might just wear his state canteen gorro on the streets of Elmiras.

I can never forget the thing with King Allah at Elmiras Prison, ’cause the way I reacted at that particular time tells me who I really am. It was the last incident before I went home in 2000. I was in general population at that particular time.

We was in the yard, me and a couple of dudes, when all of a sudden, boom, a big commotion goes on by the exercise area. A couple of dudes scrambling. Goin’ at it. Dudes named Badass comes runnin’ toward me—Yef I seen him head over ear, stuff somethin’ in the grass. Yea, I realize I had a beef with Badass in Rikers. But after that we got tight. After that he was my home. Now, I know the dude Badass was a Free Prentice. In prison they call themselves Godfathers, and they are militant, very retaliatory-oriented. The leader of the Godfathers in the whole state system is named Allah and he was in my house.

Looked like war to me.

Now, I was in a bad position and a powerful position at the same time. I’m short to the street, just two months. Eight weeks to click. If I click Badass, we start scramble in the yard and I get a change. I can get years for that. Then I get to stand up again, which is more likely than not. Then I’ll be like Allah. Maybe I’ll never go home.

But I don’t allow myself to think like that. That kind of thought makes you weak and vulnerable. I’m about consistency. If standin’ up for Badass is the right thing to do when you got ten years, it’s the right thing to do when you got ten days.

So that was not a good situation for me. I was just placed in it, as the case may be. But that’s how life is. You get placed in a situation and you deal with it according to who you are. You just got to know who you are.

On the other side of the situation is the simple fact that I got so many people on my side that I can’t even count them. The next day when they break us out for recreation I told my dudes to stay on the other side of the yard where the basketball court was at. There was fifty to sixty on my side. The Godfathers had only twenty-five to thirty people. So the leaders of the Five Percenters, Allah and Nation, came out. It was around Thanksgiving I had my war gear on. I had the state Corbett jacket, green wool coat hot pulled down, green pants. State boots. I always fight in boots. I also had newspapers rolled up under the jacket and stuffed around my chest and my upper back like a vest, a pillowcase bulletproof vest. That’s how we do. I’m standing with my people.

Allah makes like a time-out sign and he makes a motion with his hand like he wants to holler at me. So just him and me walk to the middle of the yard.

His tall and light-skinned and I’m short and black. He had real gray hair, almost white, and those nice spec glasses. He looked to me like a college teacher, a father figure. But I didn’t even think of him like that. ’Cause he was a light-skinned and my father was supposedly real black, like me. He got murdered in Brooklyn when I was fourteen years old.

Allah starts talking: "Yo, Kevin, I respect you. I know what you’re about. I know what you’re capable of doing. And check this out, my respect don’t have nothing to do with the fact that you have the upper hand here in terms of numbers. It has to do with you deserve me your loyalty to your man and you are willing to lose your freedom behind this.

Right away I’m alert, ’cause I’m not gonna let my release date have any effect on allowing him to influence me in any way.

"That’s right," I told him straight up. "That’s what I want you to see. If it means me lose my freedom, we gonna still stand up.

Now Allah starts talkin’ very direct like he was a fuckin’ father or some shit. "Kevin, I want you to bear somethin’ straight up from my heart. I don’t got a chance to go home but you do. I need you exit. I don’t need you in here."

I didn’t know exactly what he meant about recallin’ me on the outside, ’cause we was never close like that. Later on, it come to the conclusion that he meant he needed the freedom or somebod he respected go back to the world. It wasn’t political. It was personal, meaning that he was forgotten by the world but he
short to the street

a full backfield of assassins in black ski masks, crouched and moving in formation behind him. He ducked, twisted, and ran, so close to the ground he could touch the pavement with his palms. As he sprinted, he yanked his nine-millimeter .45 ACP from his belt with his right hand and fired two shots across his body. A return shot kicked up a puff of concrete dust to his right. He whipped around and glared himself to the quarter panel of a maroon Lincoln Town Car. The escape was almost perfect, especially when a Good Samaritan, a female corrections officer, threw the door of her moving car open and sped away with Davis beside her. But as he darted away from the Lincoln, laying his gun on the ground as he moved, a final barrage of nine-millimeter bullets blasted a bystander in the buttocks and caught Kevin's trailing leg, one bullet entering through his hamstring.

Both Kevin and the wounded bystander were taken to Brookdale Hospital. The unfortunate woman, arraigned on a bed in the same room as Davis, on the other side of a dingy screen, wasn't talking. Kevin Davis thought it was because she was a nice person. Detective Bobby Diamond of the Housing Police thought it was on account of fear.

'I promise you one thing,' the lawman said from Davis's bedside. 'We won't go looking for the one who killed you.'

There are more scars. A two-inch welt rides high on his left cheekbone. In 1993 when he was twenty-four years old Davis had come down to Rikers Island jail from upstate to fight his last remaining and most significant charge, the ambush homicide.

There was a Muslim inmate from Bed-Stuy in Brooklyn in his housing unit, C-05, and he was chasing an acquaintance of Davis's armed with a shank stripped from a locker. Davis was on what he called 'acceleration.' If there was any altercation with the slightest connection to him he was going to engage. The Muslim inmate ran right past Davis to the gate and Kevin jumped on his back and swung at him with a razor. Hopping and bucking, the inmate reached back across his own left shoulder and with a wild lucky swing sliced open Davis's cheek.

A dangerous piercing under his right pectoral and the twisted skin on his left trapezius are from a battle with Puerto Ricans in the yard at Orleans in 1997.

Despite the ruined patches of skin, as his release date nears, the thirty-
that moment, I pulled the hat off and turned the jacket inside out. Jesus Christ, I felt like I was an American Most Wanted.

I was with my cousin Reggie in Brownsville when I finally got searched. But they didn’t know who I was. They thought I was Keith Williams, that’s how my prints always come up. So I was in the police van on my way out the lineup at the Housing Police precinct on Sutter when Demand, the detective who slept in his car and knew every fuckin’ thing, spots me. He’s like, “Where you taking him?” The cop driving the van is like, “This is Keith Williams and we take him to Gold Street for burglary.” At that moment, Demand is like, “No, that’s Kevin Davis and we want him for the Ambroy incident in October. Take him back inside.” The detectives in the squad room had a copy of the book and Reggie signed it for them. “Killin’ Ken.” Why not?

Not that many people that I associate with read books. So, even though I don’t appear in the actual book, people saw my picture on the cover and assumed that the book was about me, and that always worked to my advantage.

I have never attacked good people. I tend to isolate the bully in a group, the intimidator. Then I bully him and intimidate him. So the fact that the dude on Ambroy was beatin’ up a kid and had a fight with Francesca would have been more than enough reason for me to get involved.

People talk about the nineteen shots and my mate Bang even had the autopsy picture of the victim. I don’t know where he got it but they had it in prison. What do you think of a person who would shoot someone and turn it in? You think they had that person has mental problems. But since Ambroy that’s the way people have looked at me. That’s some ill shit; they think I’m the person who did it. I must be an animal, some kind of a beast. Where I come from, bein’ known as an animal is a good thing. Case closed.

If nothing goes wrong at Elmore Correctional Facility, Davis will be released in a matter of months. He has received no meaningful vocational training while in prison. Most of those programs were done away with in the 1970s and ’80s as the prison population grew darker. Legislation passed across the nation in the late nineties augmenting a system of collateral, or “invisible,” punishment will make it more difficult for him to build a life when he is released. In most states he will be denied the right to vote if he is on parole. In ten states he will be disfranchised permanently.
Davis has been shuttling between upstate prisons, Congress passed legislation allowing the exclusion from federally supported housing of individuals convicted of drug crimes or violent acts. Davis has been convicted of both. His record will also disqualify him from receiving a student loan or adopting a child.

As the lights in Davis’s cell flicker and go off, as he lays his head on his pillow and listens to distant shouts and the same voice chanting the same lyric, “It’s the American Way / con I’m the G-A-N-G-S-T-A.” Another inmate belches. “Shut the fuck up. Don’t make me kill again!” The rapper squeezes out a couple more lines. “Con I’m scrawny / Wanted by America,” and pipes down.

In the silence, Kevin whispers, “Eminem.”

Kevin Davis knows nothing of the Rust Belt economy of central New York State, the factory closings and the rampant unemployment that have forced over 40 percent of young adults to quit the Elmira region in the last decade. He cannot visualize the city’s hard-bitten east side, where young mothers look forward to public assistance checks while their boyfriends hustle cash by peddling crack to people with jobs who ride in from Pennsylvania or nearby Corning. Instead, Kevin is sure he can feel the steady, unburdened pulse of a gentle town through those walls. That is enough for him.

Just as Davis’s vision of Elmira is cobbled together from bits of movies, television shows, and the deceptive view from his prison windows, his evaluation of himself is based largely on myth. He has convinced himself little with the welfare of others. Even his good deeds have been, in some measure, about personal glory. He has only a vague notion of how a healthy family works or how a father and a husband should behave. No matter how sharp his mind or how strong his willpower, Davis has no idea how difficult it will be to earn a living legally, adapt himself to life among everyday people, and remove a nervous system designed for urban war. He will also have to learn to live in anonymity.

In Brownsville and in prison, Kevin Davis has always been a star. Like other young toughs in Brooklyn, Davis has taken great risks to ascend the ladder of status in his neighborhood. But like them, he had a broader stage in mind when he stalked the streets with a gun.

Race and economics have pushed these young men to the outskirts of the city and, if not for their criminal ferocity, to the edges of the national consciousness. They have watched the American drama unfold with its high production values and glitzy props. Instead of accepting the role of outsiders, shuffling extras in the blockbuster movie America, they grabbed a major role. Maybe they were not cut out to play the square-jawed hero, but, like the “Niggas in Ice Cube’s rhyme, they sure knew how to play a bad guy. Black rappers like Noyz and Capone name themselves after every public enemy they can think of but Hitler. With no real ideology beyond the wish for stardom, Kevin Davis has accepted the casting, complete with his own ominous stage name. He has never been the good guy, but at least he has always been a featured character. The hardest thing now will be to accept the role of bit player.