

MAURICE BROADDUS

SING MAKER

THE KNIGHTS OF BRETON COURT I

*"THE BRILLIANCE WE'VE ALL BEEN WAITING FOR —
BROADDUS DELIVERS IN A VOICE THAT CANNOT BE
IGNORED." — GARY A. BRAUNBECK*





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an excerpt from
KING MAKER
THE KNIGHTS OF BRETON COURT I
Maurice Broaddus

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CHAPTER ONE

“It ain’t even right,” King said to stave off the impending silence. He drummed his fingers along the steering wheel. Absently noting the recently closed or unoccupied stores in several strip malls along Lafayette Road, it was as if blank spaces pocked his neighborhood. Even the newly opened Wal-Mart struggled, though neighborhood lore held that within its first week it had to let fifty of its employees go for excessive shoplifting. He hated driving, preferring to walk when he could, but Big Momma asked him to pick up her son and even loaned him her car to do it. King hardly knew Prez – as he was known around the way, though born Preston Wilcox – but Big Momma was a neighborhood fixture. Her word that he was a good kid was all King needed, despite the boy striking him as just another neighborhood knucklehead.

“I know.” Prez had a just-shy-of-amiable half-smile on his face. The wisps of an attempted goatee sprouted along the sides of his mouth. Eyes fixed on

the road, he nestled into his oversized Kellogg's jacket, a picture of the Honey Smacks frog danced on the back. Though late in the summer, the temperatures remained fairly mild.

"You should have your own spot." King heard the lecturing tone in his voice, but chalked it up to wanting to mentor the boy. The streets had their lure and anything he could do to inoculate Prez to their madness, well, he couldn't help himself. His street, his responsibility – that had always been his way.

"Ain't no shame in it." A sullenness quilted Prez's face, man-child struggling with independence but having to retreat to his moms. Grandmoms, technically. His moms turned him over to Big Momma so that raising a child wouldn't slow her down. He knew full well that he'd have to hide any of his foolishness from Big Momma because she would have none of it.

"I know. Big Momma ain't gonna let her baby sleep out on the street."

"Shit, I'd still be on my own if this dude who I stayed with had let me know that he was moving out and his cousin would be taking his place. But his cousin wasn't trying to pay no rent, and it wasn't like either of us were on the lease. So, boom, the landlord kicks us out. We only had till Monday to get our stuff out of there before he puts it out. And the cousin ain't even started to pack his stuff up."

"Yeah," King said without commitment, part from having nothing to add, part due to distraction. He eased off the gas as they passed a row of apartments.

A little girl skipped into an open door while a woman struggled with pulling a basket of clothes from the backseat of her car.

“What’s up?” Prez asked, noting King’s focused attention.

“Nothing.” It wasn’t as if King was going to say “That’s my baby’s momma’s place. Look at her. You know she be having men all up in there all hours of the night. In front of Nakia.”

Prez spied a buxom, dark-complexioned woman walking in the front door of her apartment carrying a load of laundry. “Pretty girl.”

“Reminds me of someone I used to know.”

King flipped through radio stations, though Black radio in Indianapolis only came in two flavors: hip hop and adult soul. He loved hip hop, but he really needed something with a melody right now. His mom called his taste in music the legacy of his father. King had no true sense of who Luther White was, only the legend his mother made him out to be. It was easy to be a legend when you were long dead and gone.

As if Saturday afternoon traffic in front of Meijer wasn’t going to be bad enough, they crept the last mile to the Breton Court townhouses due to construction on the only street leading there. Prez eased back in his seat and put one of his Timberlands on King’s dashboard. A half-muttered “my bad” and the foot lowering followed a stern gaze from King. Kids today, King thought, no respect for anything.

Sliding into one of the parking spots, one assigned per townhouse, King grabbed the two bags of clothes from his trunk, to which Prez nodded in appreciation, and carried them toward Big Momma's. Already outside holding court, she slowly fanned herself with a tattered magazine. Her usual courtesans, the neighbors from across the way, sat around the plastic table. King couldn't quite remember the name of his neighbor who lived across from Big Momma, though they seemed like a nice family. Every Sunday they dressed up for church along with their two kids. The neighborhood kids (half of whom Big Momma ostensibly babysat) played with a garden hose, spraying each other and turning the center of the court into a mud slick, a dirt-floored "slip'n'slide". The white-haired candy lady, who had lived in the court longer than anyone else, stood on her porch passing out popsicles to any kid who took a break from the hose. Her cats keened against the front storm door like children denied the chance to play with their friends.

"Damn," he said to himself, as Prez left him with his bags to hook up with a couple of neighborhood knuckleheads who were setting up shop on the corner. Their fixed gazes dared him to do something about their presence. His face flushed with heat, but he wasn't about to return a hard look for each one he received, nor could he afford to get bent out of shape every time some fool stepped to him wrong. Attitude and anger came in shorter supply for him these days so he chose his spots rather than exhaust

himself on every bit of drama. However righteous his rage.

Merle never imagined that a Timberland boot in his midsection would be the defining moment of his day.

The abandoned shoe factory on the south side of downtown had been declared a historic landmark, but neither the city nor any foundation knew what to do with it nor wanted to put up the money to restore it for modern use. The owner languished with the albatross of high property taxes, unable to sell it, so the building existed in a state of limbo, between being and not being, and thus was the perfect place for Merle to break into and lay his head. With a flattened refrigerator box as his mattress, visions of dragons, mist, and silver-armored knights filled his dreams.

Waking with a start, disturbing the rats which scurried along the broken bits of crates and skids, Merle knew he had to make his way to the west side of town.

“Sir Rupert?” he called out. A brown and black squirrel, with a gray streak along its back, poked its head through a hole in the bay door of the building. “I had the dream again. I think the time has finally come. He has returned.”

The squirrel sat back on its haunches, eagerly working at an acorn.

“I know, I know. There have been several false alarms, but this time I know it’s real.” Merle wrapped his arms loosely around his knees and gathered his wits while Sir Rupert ate.

The squirrel finished with the nut, turned, and ran out the hole in the door.

“You’re right, you’re right. We mustn’t tarry.” Scooping up his backpack and his black raincoat, Merle slipped between the still-chained doors. The raincoat doubled as his blanket, though its winter insert had pulled free and with a few teeth missing from the zippered lining, he was unable to reattach it. Not much of a clothes horse, he kept his attire simple. A furry hat, the kind a Russian soldier languishing in Siberia would wear, a tattered black sweater with matching jeans, and black socks with no shoes. He had the most difficult of times keeping shoes and suspected Sir Rupert, prankster that he was, of nicking them at night. He pulled the raincoat tight around him, buttoning it only at the middle where a belt might fall. He already missed his normal routine that had him checking in at the Wheeler Mission, then panhandling outside of the Red Eye Café – whose owner often let him push a broom for a meal – and avoiding the police eager to sweep him under the city’s rug. It would be little more than a three hour haul to the west side that awaited him.

Merle kept to the bank of the White River which was unusually low due to the lack of rain. Though the White River was a natural ley line winding its way through the heart of the city, another one lay closer to Eagle Creek Park, along Breton Street. Whatever called him, he knew his destiny had to lie there. After three hours, he climbed up the embankment to follow 38th Street west.

The Breton Court housing addition had changed considerably in the quarter of a century since it was established. Once a solidly all-white not-quite-suburban enclave, it now languished as a neighborhood in decline. Street lore attributed this to two things. For one, the first black family moved in a decade or so ago. Their white neighbors, not wanting to let a bad element gain a foothold in the neighborhood, harassed them to the point that a U-Haul truck was soon being loaded. Unfortunately, they had made a slight miscalculation. The black family was also seeking a respite from bad elements and had more in common with their white neighbors than not. And though they moved, they never sold their town house in Breton Court. Instead, they rented it out. They found the worst of the "bad elements" they could find and let them live there rent-free for six months. The white flight was more of an exodus of Biblical proportions.

The second factor? The townhouses had since been bought up primarily by three owners who, in an act just shy of collusion, opted to let the property run down, renting to Section 8 tenants or anyone who had cash in hand. While the word "gentrification" hadn't been bandied about, their goal was to sell off the whole piece for development and by "development" they envisioned razing the entire lot.

Merle plodded along the creek line which ran the length of Breton Court from 38th Street. Sir Rupert had long scampered off, perhaps to survey the scene

from his own vantage point. No matter, Merle recognized layabouts and ne'er-do-wells when he saw them.

"What you need, old timer? You look like you need to get up." A young man, more boy than man, stepped toward him. His slightly faded blue jeans had rolled-up cuffs and sagged just below his blue and white striped boxer shorts despite the presence of a skull-buckled chain through the belt loops. Rhinestones dotted his black shirt.

"All's not right in Who-ville," Merle said.

"What you got, Dollar?" Another young man sported a formidably sized pair of black Timberland boots, smothered in a hooded jacket with a frog across its back. Merle couldn't help but think of the cartoon with the frog singing "Hello my baby, hello my darling" when no one but his owner was around.

"Don't know. You up?" Dollar asked, never one to let any potential sale slip past. The court had been a quiet stretch of real estate until Dollar built it up into a profitable venture. He was due to be moved up the ranks soon, climbing the corporate ladder, to get away from actually handling product.

"No, no. Just passing through," Merle said while he fished in his pockets as if he misplaced his wallet.

"What? We some sightseeing stop? Get right or get gone."

"I'm tired of these ghetto tourist types. 'Let's see how the po' folks be living.'" The Timberland-booted man stepped nearer, a hulk of aggression needing to be vented.

“Come on, man. Green said no drama less we had no choice.” Dollar understood that in such stark economic times, fiscal responsibilities demanded certain precaution. Ever-present muscle was the cost of doing business. But some of these young bucks were too eager to make a name, thinking that being crazy was the surest route to success. It was a headache he didn’t need.

“Green?” Merle had hoped to never hear that name again. He buried the gleam of recognition too late.

“You know Green?” Dollar tilted his head with piqued curiosity.

“Yes. Uh, not really. Maybe I’ve heard the name.”

“I bet his country ass is a snitch.” Mr Size 12 Boots gave him an exaggerated sniff. “Yeah, he smells like a snitch bitch.”

Merle waved his fingers in front of him as if with a sudden display of jazz hands. “These are not the droids you are looking for.”

“Are you making fun of me?” Before Merle could respond, the young man punched him in the gut with such force that Merle crumpled to the ground. With blood in the water, the Timberland boot slammed into his side three or four times for good measure before the man bent over to grab him by the lapels. “Yeah, I’m gonna give you a name to remember.”

“My man.” Dollar backed up a step or two, looking over his shoulder for Green, instead spying another approaching figure. “Ease up.”

“We got a problem?” Tall and straight, visibly muscled, but not with the diseled artifice of prison weight, the man had the complexion of burnt cocoa. His eyes burned with a stern glint, both decisive and sure. Hard, but not in a street tough way, his walk was street savvy, with a hint of the swagger of someone who knew how handsome he was. Carrying himself properly was a survival tool. Level chin, squared up, not moving too fast which betrayed fear. The streets hadn’t changed much in the years Merle had wandered them. If your body language portrayed you as scared, you became nothing but prey. Despite the oversized black T-shirt with a Jackie Robinson portrait, the young man wasn’t much older than the other man-boys. He cold-eyed both Dollar and Mr Size 12, though not so hard as to give Mr Size 12 a challenge he’d have no choice but to respond to.

“Nah, we ain’t got a problem. Simply a misunderstanding,” Dollar said.

“He in the wrong place at the wrong time,” Mr Size 12 said. “He needed... directions.”

“He’s just an old man.” The man turned to Mr Size 12 with a weary disappointment. For a moment, the two seemed to square off, an untold story between them, but Mr Size 12 without displaying a measure of backing down, withdrew nonetheless. It was as if his spirit, if not his bearing, deserted him. “Come on, man, he isn’t even worth the hassle. Things that slow out here?”

“Come on. Fun’s fun, but we still on the clock,” Dollar said.

The Timberland-booted man cocked his hand like a gun, fired off a shot at Merle, then trailed Dollar.

"You all right? You know them?" The man's gaze followed them, disappointment rife in his eyes as he helped Merle to his feet.

"All jackals and hyenas... without a lion in sight." Merle brushed the leaves and loose dirt from him, though his many-stained jacket reeked of grime.

"Uh huh."

"Who is my would-be savior?"

"My name's King. King James White."

"Merle."

"Merle what?" King asked.

"At your service, oh King." Merle bowed before King's steady gaze.

"Great."

"Damn, son. You broke him off a piece for real." Dollar laughed as they made their way back to the spot. Brief distraction aside, they were still on the grind, though he always had his eye out for new talent. "You ready to step up to this here game?"

"I'm here to put in work. I'm tired of playing out here." Prez knew what he was going to hear from Big Momma. Not even in her house and already he'd found the streets. But he'd been watching Dollar from way back, a few years at least. Steady slinging, always in fine clothes and just enough bling to set it off. It was either the game or continue to attend Northwest High School. Though the ladies were fine up in there, ladies could be had just as easily out

here. No point in wasting everyone's time killing time and taking up space in school when he needed to be out here doing dirt.

"Anxious to make a name for yourself."

"Something like that."

"I feel you. Look here, you hang with us for a minute. Think of yourself as an apprentice or some shit. See how we do. We got our eyes on you and we'll see how you handle yourself."

"Yeah?"

They bumped fists. A new day, same as it ever was.

Ultimately stemming from the nearby Eagle Creek reservoir, creeks bordered the Breton Court condos along the south and east. Not too long ago, several kids had followed the tributaries back to the reservoir and drowned. The tragedy was still repeated at supper time to children who dawdled too long after the street lights went on. The main drive of Breton Court was laid out like a horseshoe with elongated tips. As one went down either side, individual courts of townhouses faced one another. King lived at the base of the horseshoe. A few townhouses were still owned and rented out by people who simply refused to sell to the three owners even if they didn't live there.

King stayed in one of those. His condo overlooked the southern bend of the creek, now overgrown with weeds and filled with discarded shopping carts from the nearly vacant strip mall on the other side of it. It was better than living out of a car which he had done

for months. Clumped between his court of condos and the next were trash dumpsters. A black raincoat and a pair of jutting legs dangled from one. Merle fell from his perch, a tangle of legs and arms in an awkward sprawl, then drew the collar of his black trench coat up about his neck, though there was no chill to the air. The aluminum foil helmet was a nice touch.

“What’s the good word, Merle?”

The old bullshit fool gave a clenched-fist salute, though he didn’t pause from his rummaging activities. Merle had a familiar spirit. Maybe he was one of those faces, those strangers you bumped into on a bus or train and instantly poured yourself out to. Maybe he was one of those neighborhood peripheral figures who seemed to travel in the same circles he did, even if the two had never officially met. Thinking back on those times, King felt a certain comfort about the man, as if the shambling bearded tramp were a filthy protective shadow. If he were the Merle he had heard people whisper and laugh about over the years, by most accounts, he appeared better, younger, now than he did back in the day. Maybe he cleaned up from drugs and such and was now merely homeless. His breath smelled of pork rinds and Funyuns.

“Signs, signs, everywhere are signs.”

“I heard that.” King plopped down on the curb, withdrew a burrito from his bag, and offered it to Merle. “Somehow I’m not really surprised to see you here. You seem to get around.”

"That's me. The bad penny." Merle pinched off bits of bread and scattered them about him. He shoed away the birds, making way for a squirrel to come collect as he will. Without a warning, Merle suddenly bowled over, gripping his head as if trying to keep it from exploding. His face flushed an agonized shade of red, his mouth locked in a silent scream. Collapsing on the ground, he waved King off from helping him. When he next spoke, his voice had the weak rasp of a sick kitten.

"You alright, man?"

"I'm fine. I suffer from spells."

"You ought to see a doctor. Get that checked out."

"I'm past the concerns of a doctor. What say you, good King? Caught twixt the knights of Dred and Night?"

"Nah, they just jawing. They needed to show their teeth some."

"The Night's too long. Night's daddy was a crackhead. Got hit in the head with a shovel."

"Do what?"

"He was sitting on a curb, people acting stupid. Crackhead just bopped him straight in the side of the old noggin." Merle tapped the side of his head, dislodging his aluminum cap. He sprayed food with each sloppy bite, losing almost as much as he ate while he spoke.

"My daddy was crazy, so I hear," King said. He fought to be legally emancipated from his mother years ago. She had two little ones at home and he was old enough to live on his own so that she could

concentrate on providing for the young ones. According to his grandma, she was never quite the same after his father's death. Whenever she spoke of him, it was with a mix of awe and sorrow, as if either she had been betrayed or her idea of him had been. At any rate, he had to get his social security benefits transferred into his name but to her address so that she could spend it. They'd make it without him. As would Nakia. More family he'd abandoned.

"An OG OD'd on the streets. Brought down in a fight over a woman. He had to have her, though."

"My pops wasn't no drug addict."

"Never said he was. Heavy is the head... and all that." Merle wiped his hands in the grass. "Prisons and graveyards are full of fools who wore the crown."

"Truth and all, I didn't know my father at all to speak of. I just sort of fill in the blanks here and there, the way I'd want them." King froze, not understanding why he gave up that bit of personal information at all much less to a stranger. A white stranger at that. Like he thought, maybe Merle had one of those faces. Before he could speak again, the homeless man spoke.

"Can I tell you something?" Merle leaned in, still chewing on too big a bite of his burrito.

"Sure."

"Last night, I dreamt of the dragon."

"You sound like that's supposed to mean something." King had an air of being trapped in himself,

of not knowing who he was, that came off as rather petulant. "You act like you ain't right in the head and yet you seem so..."

"Content. I am what I am. I know who I am. I accept who I am."

King heard a bit too much bite in his tone. "What does that mean?"

"You war with yourself. You're the 'should've' man. You—"

"Should've finished high school. Should've gotten involved in something larger than myself. Should've let myself fall in love," King said.

"Instead you hide, afraid of betrayal. A spectator in your own life."

"Until lately. I don't know how to explain it."

"You felt the call."

"The call?"

"To action." Merle thrust the remaining bread into the air, a makeshift sword jabbing at clouds. He turned the jousting loaf toward King and engaged him in a one-sided duel, waving the bread about in strokes and feints. "Feelings overtook you. Who you really are wants to take over."

"And who am I?" King kept turning to face the loaf-wielding man. As much as instinct might have told him to, he couldn't write Merle off as either a bum or a lunatic. He had too much gravitas, too much presence, to be easily dismissed.

"That is the question. I can't answer it for you. Some people are built to lead, some to follow. Which are you, lion or lamb?"

King inspected the stretch of Breton Court like there were parts within the sphere of his influence and the hinterlands, those areas on the outskirts, out of his influence. Prez. Damn. What happened to that brother? Everyone seemed infected with the same sickness, on edge. King saw the fear, the frustration, the cauldron of terror and rage with life reduced to desperation and survival. So many stood by and did nothing; sick of gangs and violence, yet suffering in silence.

“You get off on knowing the rule book without having to share anything.”

“Knowledge,” Merle tapped his aluminum foil helmet with the loaf, then returned to feeding the birds and squirrels, “is power.”

“Power is power, too.”

“Ah, the first lesson in ruling. That wasn’t so hard, now was it?”

“What wasn’t?”

“Making a decision. Making the hard choices is a gift.”

“What do...” King didn’t know why he sought Merle’s advice, or approval, nor could he explain the strange sense of kinship between them. “What’s my next step?”

“Take hold of your destiny.”

“How do I do that?”

“Either you seek it out or...” Merle stood up as if dismissed. “Here come your boys. Anyway, I have places to be and fey to annoy.”

“What?”

“You’re the right guy, my guy. If you were another guy, you’d be the wrong guy.”

Evenings were made to sit out and King relished the few quiet moments. He had grown up in the area though now he spent some time away, maybe to come into his own. His boys were still his boys. So they drank some, listened to the sounds of kids playing, the occasional car horns, and dogs barking from the fenced back patios of the rowhouses.

“Ain’t nothing changed,” King said.

“Look around you. Why would it change?” A hard-faced man, with a scar on the back of his neck, Wayne had the build of a defensive lineman, stocky and chiseled, with the swinging step of someone who knew how to use their size should the necessity warrant. Thus also explaining why the plastic chair wobbled every time he shifted his weight. A mane of long dreadlocks furled down to his shoulders. Wayne was King’s case manager down at Outreach Inc., a ministry that worked with homeless and at-risk youth. He’d helped King with his emancipation and got his benefits straightened out. Even though Wayne was four years older, the span of attaining his college degree, he hung out with King now out of true friendship as much as anything else. King had a spark about him that drew folks to him.

“You know what your problem is?” King asked.

“What’s that?”

“You pessimistic. Now me, I’m a glass half full of Kool Aid sort of man.”

“Just something in the air.” Wayne carried his survival instinct, too. The eyes in the back of his head that let him know when something was up. King respected and depended on it.

“I know. I feel it, too. A vibe. Like a whole lot of anger bubbling out there waiting for an excuse to blow up.”

“Yeah, something like that,” Wayne said.

“Want another one?”

“Nah, I’m good with this one. Don’t need to be setting a bad example for you young ‘uns.”

“Sure.”

“What about you?” King raised a beer to Lott.

Lott bobbed his head to beats and rhymes only he heard, keeping his own counsel. He was a week past getting his hair tightened up and his large brown eyes drifted with the activity of the court. His FedEx uniform – a thick sweatshirt over blue slacks, his name badge, “Lott Carey” with a picture featuring his grill-revealing smile, wrapped around his arm – girded him like a suit of armor. Lott put on his pimp-roll strut for all the eyes to see as he moved toward an open seat, a puffed-up exaggerated gait with a cool blank stare, his face locked into a grimace of put-on hostility purposefully designed to make old ladies clutch their purses and white suburbanites cross the street if they were in his path. A row of faux gold caps grilled his teeth. He was a wrong time/wrong place sort, always getting caught up in situations he didn’t start but felt compelled to finish, with jail being the typical finish line. These days he

kept his dreams simple: dreaming of holding a job and breathing free air, not like some of the other talkers on the block.

“You know I don’t drink.”

“It’s still polite to ask.”

“And where would we be without politeness?”

King nodded then popped open the beer. There were too few evenings with anything approaching peace, so he opted to enjoy the time he had.

It was a glass half full of Kool Aid evening.

A nest of fine braids lined Omarosa’s head, not a hair out of place as if she had just stopped from the beauty salon. Hers was a cultivated beauty, but where would her kind be without beauty? With skin like heavily creamed coffee, almond eyes that missed nothing, and the high cheekbones with accompanying aquiline nose of a European aristocrat, her pointed ears were the only tell of her mixed fey heritage. The pair of handcuffs clicked in her hand as she spun one spindle through the rest of the cuff.

Invisible to all, she strolled along the court sidewalks. Only three kinds of people generally remained invisible: fiends, homeless, and pros. Such a station in life supplied invisibility because as fixtures in the neighborhood, most folks averted their eyes from them either in sympathizing shame or due to the desire to not be approached by them. Folks tended to assume she was a pro, though few dared ask her for sex. She allowed them to carry on in their assumptions, for her kind also valued the power of

illusion. After all, few suspected the need to be on guard against the sawn-off 12-gauge that rarely left her side.

“The game begins again.” She didn’t turn her head to address him nor otherwise betray any surprise at his presence. Few managed to sneak up on her, with her battle-hardened senses keen as the edge of the blade strapped to her thigh. However, Merle had a way of appearing when least expected. “All the players are almost in place.”

“Indeed,” he said. “They’ve woken the dragons.”

