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On a chilly September night, Venus Butler's telephone rang. It was almost 1 a.m. A man whispered, "Baby, these guys got me. They're going to kill me."

Even sleep-dazed, she recognized her boyfriend's voice. "Call my brother, my mother, Baby. Get me some help," said 28-year-old Antoine "Tone" Caruthers in a low desperate tone.

Venus sat up in the bed. The phone went dead. Thirty seconds later, it rang again, a stranger on the line. "If you want to see him again, we want \$100,000," the caller said.

Rattled, she explained that she didn't have that kind of money. The caller found a quick way to get Tone to talk: "Beat that n", he yelled out over the receiver. "Get these numbers so this bitch can call these people." Venus heard the man she loved screaming in the background as he shouted out numbers.

She jotted them down on anything she could find, then called the police. What happened next was pieced together from statements Venus gave to police, and her later testimony at a trial of Tone's abductors in Detroit's Third Judicial District Court.

The cops came, and the calls, angry and insistent, went on all night. Venus did her best to stall until the police could get a plan in place. In the interim, she negotiated the ransom down to \$10,000. Tone's mother, Charlotte Rose Johnson, who owns a number of small businesses, helped Venus raise the cash.

In a call at 7 a.m., the kidnappers agreed to an 8 a.m. dropoff of the ransom at Church's Fried Chicken on Grand River Road on Detroit's west side; Tone, they said, would be dropped off at an intersection about three miles away. The hour gave police time to copy the serial numbers of the ransom bills and put at least six undercover agents in the drop-off zone.

This drama had begun shortly after midnight at DLA Records, where Tone was a part owner. The three armed intruders ordered everyone to the floor. "They started asking . . . 'Who was Tone?'" Maurice Evans, a friend of Tone's, told police. "They made Tone get up."

One person not in the store was Malik Shields, considered by some a partner in the record store. He'd gotten a phone call just before Tone was snatched; he left, returning after the intruders were gone. He learned of the kidnapping but made what police say was an odd decision: he didn't call the cops, or Tone's family. Instead, he calmly closed the store and drove off.

Among the six undercover agents in the drop zone at Church's Chicken was Officer Kanar Wise, who, in order to get the best view possible, flashed his police ID at Church's, picked up a broom and started sweeping. The scene would soon turn to chaos. On signal, Venus pulled her car into Church's lot, rolled down her window and tossed out the ransom in a brown paper bag. It landed behind a low concrete divider.

Two black males, spotted earlier by Officer Wise milling around on the opposite side of the street, made a move toward the money but didn't seem to see it. After driving back home, Venus was greeted with an angry call. "Why you playing with me," the caller said. "You must want this n—— dead." Exasperated, she explained where the money was.

About 15 minutes later, the Church's undercover officers spotted the same two men again, this time in a two-door Oldsmobile. They swooped in on the cash. Officer Wise and others arrested them. The cops popped open the trunk, hoping they might find Tone. He wasn't there—though his blood was everywhere.

Based upon interviews with police and testimony in Detroit's Third Judicial Circuit Court, Tone, it seems, never had a chance.

About a half-hour before Tone was kidnapped, Ichard Oden and accomplices targeted DLA Records. They didn't know Tone, but they'd heard from a street snitch that there was money stashed in the store's back room; and that Tone and Malik Shields "were pulling in thousands of dollars" from drug dealing, said one of the assailants, Corey Davis, alias C-Murder, in another statement to police.

Marched out with a gun to his head, Tone, in fact, told his abductors "there was \$18,000 in the ceiling," Corey said in his testimony. "But nobody wanted to go back and get it." (Such money was never found and police say that Tone had no drug record.)

Instead, the abductors took Tone to a house on Monterey Street in East Detroit where Chantrienes Barker, a friend of Ichard Oden's, lived. He was led in handcuffs to the basement, where his abductors began to beat and torment him. His captors started calling some of the numbers Tone had given them. They would pass him the cellphone and have him beg for money.

In trial testimony, Corey described what else happened: "Tone was lying by a drain. They poured bleach on his face and he was hollering, because they had hit him over the head." Around 4 a.m.—a time when they were still negotiating his ransom with Venus Butler—"we got the boy and put him into the trunk of [Corey's] car," Ichard testified at trial. Shortly thereafter, in an area of abandoned factories, they shot him three times in the head. His body was found at 7:45 a.m. Police later said he had been sexually assaulted with a large, blunt object and a front tooth had been pulled out.

Corey Davis, Ichard Oden and Chantrienes Barker were all convicted of murder in the case, according to Third Judicial District Court trial records; a fourth suspect, Jason Henderson, pleaded guilty to a murder charge in the same court; he struck an agreement with prosecutors to testify against the others in exchange for a reduced prison sentence. They are all serving time in various Michigan prisons.

It was left to Tone's mother, Charlotte Rose Johnson, to bury him. Six hundred people attended

the funeral, including his three sons, one by Venus Butler.

One person absent was Tone's alleged partner, Malik Shields. He'd been questioned by police regarding Tone's death; they'd found suspicious his decision not to report the kidnapping. He was never charged, and it became immaterial three months later.

Malik, Detroit police say, was himself murdered in a drive-by shooting as he drove his Range Rover on a Detroit freeway.