

The Seventh Sin

by William Bott

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to all the Edgar Brantleys out there. You are not alone. You are never alone.

Acknowledgments

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Prologue

I am a father, a son, a friend, an enemy, a mentor, and a fool. You can call me Eddie – my friends do – though my birth certificate now has "Edgar Wallace Brantley" printed on it. I've been all over the national news channels, but if you live under a rock (or in a cave) you may be wondering who exactly Edgar Brantley is. Sometimes, I wonder the same thing myself.

* * *

One day, back in elementary school, our counselor visited my class to have us take part in an exercise. This exercise was supposed to help us realize who we were and how we develop. I was the first student whom Mr. Fogarty called on.

Mr. Fogarty gazed at me through his thick-rimmed glasses as though he was trying to peer into my very soul. "Who are you?" he inquired.

I looked back at our counselor. "I'm Eddie, Mr. Fogarty."

He shook his head at my answer. "No, that's your name. Who are you?" he repeated.

I glanced away, shifting uneasily at my desk. "I play games and draw pictures."

"No," Mr. Fogarty admonished, "that's what you like to do. Who *are* you?"

The tall man leaned toward me, his stature intimidating despite the kind expression on his face. Though I looked around helplessly (as if the correct response was somewhere in the room) I found myself unable to answer such a seemingly simple question. You could've asked me that question two decades later, and I'd still have been unable to tell you.

How can the answer to such a fundamental question elude one for so long? How long and hard must one search one's soul to find the answer? Last summer saw my twenty-eighth birthday, and I still don't have the answer.

One thing is certain – I've made plenty of mistakes during my journey through this life. I've angered some and hurt or let down others. Perhaps if I tell you my story and confess my seven worst sins, you can offer me some type of solace, and *you* can tell me exactly who I am.

Chapter 1 - Genesis

I was born on the seventh of August to Mark and Claire Brantley in Virginia Beach, Virginia, at Sentara General Hospital. Our family was in the lower-middle class, and if the cozy, aging place we stayed wasn't a constant reminder of that fact, then my discounted school lunches were.

Most of my clothes used to live at the Salvation Army, but I received a new sweater every Christmas, courtesy of Grandma Doris and her knitting needles. I didn't like most of them – they were *just* shy of hideous – but they were brand-new and they were mine. *My* body was the only one they'd ever covered.

I rarely felt the pincers of hunger pains at bedtime, other than when I was being punished. You'd have had a rough time of it in our house, though, if you don't like beans and franks or macaroni and cheese. I didn't care for most of the vegetables that my parents bought, either, but the carrots were nice. It's a shame that they were so expensive.

Most of the other kids at school wanted the latest BKs or Reeboks, but I was thankful for my worn Adidas. Mom and Dad rarely wasted money on material things (other than my occasional video game), opting instead to spend the little extra money they earned on family outings to the zoo or picnics at the beach. I cherished every moment that we spent together, and that's something that no shoes or video games could ever replace. When I was with Mom and Dad, I was enveloped in love, hope, and security.

Dad was tall – just over six feet – with a bulky frame. His brown hair and eyes usually made him appear to be serious, and it didn't help matters that he liked to stroke his clean-shaven face while thinking.

My father raised me to be mindful of others. Trust me when I say that it was strictly enforced. A thin leather belt across my rear end was often the only warning I received when I sassed someone. I know that my father loves me and meant well, but he couldn't always express his emotions properly.

Dad was a welder for much of his life. He busted his hump, day in and day out. In 1974, he left Michigan, the only place he ever knew, to weld at Norfolk Naval Shipyard. As you may have guessed, my father had good job security at a shipyard.

Each day, Dad came home from the shipyard with red skin and the not-uncommon burn on his hands. To hear him tell it, though, it was just a typical nine-to-five. In *my* book, however, any job where burns are routine is *not* a typical job. It was *his* job, though, and it kept a roof over our heads.

Dad busted his tail, pouring out gallons of sweat each day just to pay the bills. His work ethic was difficult to top. Once I began to truly understand the world around me, I found myself in awe of this man that was my father. He wouldn't do a thing that wasn't honest and fair. He was strict, but he was always fair.

One time when we were shopping for groceries, I found a faded, brown leather wallet next to a floor display. I picked it up and peeked inside to find several twenty-dollar bills and a five-dollar bill. I wanted to keep it. Finders, keepers, after all.

Dad wouldn't hear of it. He left the cart with Mom and walked me to the lost-and-found in the front office. I felt cheated as I prepared to surrender my bounty. As soon as we entered the tidy office, my father explained the situation to the daytime manager and told me to hand over the wallet. Grudgingly, I did so.

As it happened, a rough-looking, tattooed man who reeked of Marlboros and Jack Daniels was there, asking about that very wallet. He snatched the billfold from the manager and stuffed it in his black leather jacket's interior pocket.

The biker sneered at me and, without so much as a word of thanks, turned on his heels and left, the clomping of his heavy biker boots echoing down the hall. I was unimpressed. Dad, however, just shook his head and smiled. "Eddie, always do what's right, even if no one else cares."

Mom was a half-foot shorter than Dad, with flowing blond locks that she kept in a ponytail that reached her shoulders. Her deep green eyes, slender figure, and dazzling smile made her the envy of other women more often than she'd admit.

My mother used to work as a beautician before she met my father. As soon as her then-boyfriend discovered that she was pregnant with me, the slimeball left her. What kind of heartless creep ditches the woman he claims to love just because she's knocked up? Every time I saw a falling star, I wished it would land on him. Do I sound bitter? Maybe I am. Just a little.

Mom met my father (my *real* father, not the DNA donor) when I was six years old. She had been a single mother since having given birth to me. Though Mom was always patient and loving, having two parents in my life was a definite improvement.

As soon as Mom and Dad got married at Western Branch Community Church, in Chesapeake, he wouldn't let her work. Dad was old-fashioned like that. Although he didn't bring home a lot after paying taxes, bills, and the mortgage, he refused to have his wife working. Dad took pride in being the sole breadwinner, and I took pride in Dad.

Both of my parents have imparted many lessons to me and have helped shape me and how I perceive and interpret the world around me. They tinted the glasses through which I view reality. How, then, can I truly understand everything from a neutral point of view or see things as those around me see them?

I am enclosed – no, imprisoned – within my own machine and its biases and influences. I suffer from limitations that are impossible for me to even be aware of. Nothing in this life can help me view reality from outside this flawed machine, but how can I decide if I even *want* to escape? I haven't the faintest idea how reality would appear to me from outside my body; it could be wondrous, but it could just as easily be horrifying.

Chapter 2 - Original Sin

Like most people, I've sinned and made messes of things more times than I care to count. I'm afraid I don't have time to get into all of them, though, and I'm sure you don't have time to hear about all of them. I'd like to confess my seven worst transgressions and share a few other selected memories that I hope you will find interesting.

My sincere hope is that you will begin to understand me, love me, pray for me, and maybe even forgive me for my sins. I've loved and been loved, hurt and been hurt, laughed and made others laugh, cried and made others cry.

I hope you will take heart in my triumphs and heed of my warnings. Maybe you can learn from my mistakes and avoid the pitfalls I fell into. If I can salvage even one lost soul with my story, then maybe, just maybe, I can leave a positive mark on this weary world.

* * *

I was only twelve when the Riley family moved in down the street in our lower-class suburban neighborhood. I watched curiously as the beefy movers emptied a white-paneled moving truck of boxes and furniture. The bulky men in the ragged uniforms hoisted dressers, bed frames, large boxes, and other assorted household furnishings with apparent ease. My imagination ran wild as I envisioned who was moving into the small house with the forest-green shutters and light blue trim.

The movers soon finished the job; I lost interest in the whole affair. Eagerly, I grabbed my worn Game Boy and resumed my quest in Pokémon Blue. Meowth, Pikachu, and I took part in grand adventures once more.

* * *

Hours later, a knock at the front door echoed throughout the house. (For the previous week, our doorbell had been broken, and Dad had promised three times already to fix it.) Annoyed by the interruption during my battle to win the Rainbow Badge, I dropped my Game Boy on my bed and hurried to the front door. I opened the door; there stood two grown-ups and a kid about my age.

"Hey there, champ," said the man, by way of greeting. "Are your parents home?"

I half-shrugged and turned around. "Mom! Dad! Someone wants you at the door!" I yelled toward the back of the house. I shuffled off, intent on returning to my battle.

A moment later, my parents emerged from the den, scolding me. "Eddie! You could've told them to come in. Please come in," Mom offered, this last part directed to our three guests.

The trio entered, looking around at our home's sparing decor. The woman offered a bottle of wine to my mother, who graciously accepted it and set it on the kitchen counter.

The man of the three shook my father's hand and spoke. "I'm Daren Riley. This is my wife, Ann, and our pride and joy, Lenny. We just moved in down the street and wanted to introduce ourselves to our new neighbors."

Ann Riley was an energetic, smiling woman whose aura captivated those around her. Her husband, Daren, was a slender high school teacher who seemed like one of those people who were always in (annoyingly) good spirits. Their son, Lenny, was about my age, and his parents kept his dark hair cut short. His brown eyes peered with wonder at us and our home.

My father smiled as the two women embraced warmly. "It's a pleasure to meet you all. The neighborhood is usually nice and quiet, so I hope you will feel welcome here." Dad faced my

bedroom. "Edgar, come out here and meet the neighbors," he called out. Reluctantly, I put my Game Boy down again and returned to the living room.

Dad smiled. "I'm Mark, and Claire is my wife. This," he put his arm around my shoulders, "is our son, Edgar."

"Daaaad!" I protested. "You know I hate that name. Call me Eddie!"

"Eddie," he corrected himself. Dad reached for the wine, examining it at arm's length. "Very nice White Zinfandel, Daren. Thank you for the thoughtful gift." Dad was a blue-collar laborer, a Budweiser man, not a wine connoisseur. I surmised that he was just being polite about the wine.

"Would you like to stay for dinner?" Mom asked. "Eddie here might even have a new playmate," she teased, leaning over and ruffling my hair. I shot her an irritated look before smoothing my hair with my hands. She knew it bugged me, but she couldn't help herself.

"We'd love to, if it's no trouble," Ann said. "We don't want to impose."

"Nonsense," Mom replied. "We have a whole pan of lasagna in the oven, and there's always room for more at the table."

That was debatable. I wasn't convinced that six could fit around the small, round, oak dinner table.

The two sets of parents strolled to the den, chatting and gesturing merrily, while Lenny tagged along with me on my way back to my bedroom. Lenny's eyes lit up when he spotted my Game Boy.

"Is that Pokémon Blue?" he asked, excitedly.

"Yeah. I got over sixty Pokémon," I bragged.

"Really? I have Pokémon Red but I just got to forty," Lenny answered dejectedly.

"Well, I think I got most of the Blue-only Pokémon, so we can trade some. I got extras anyway," I explained.

Lenny grinned. "Okay!"

We discussed Pokémon and which one would beat other ones until supper was ready. We gathered around the table and took our places, the savory aroma of freshly-baked lasagna and warm Parmesan filling our nostrils. My mouth watered as I waited to be served.

Dad grabbed a corkscrew from the utensil drawer and struggled to uncork the wine, succeeding only after three attempts – and with Mom's help. (White Zinfandel with beef lasagna? Who *does* that? Martha Stewart would be appalled!)

Dad poured a glass of wine for each of the adults and a Cherry Coke for Lenny and me. Mom sliced a generous portion of the main course for me, but I served my own peas and corn. Everyone else served themselves except Lenny, who had to submit to his mother's rationing.

We spent dinner talking to each other, enjoying the beef-and-cheese-layered lasagna. Usually, Mom sprinkled oregano and garlic powder on top of it, but she had neglected to do so that night. It was fine, though. Every bite I cut oozed filling onto my plate.

As we finished eating, the Rileys offered to do the dishes. Dad refused to let our guests clean up. I wished he hadn't. Baked-on lasagna is a pain in the neck to scour, and guess whose job it was?

As a steel wool pad and I wrestled with the lasagna pan, Mom and Dad walked the Rileys out. The moment they stepped outside I swiped a finger along the edge of the pan, scooping up sauce and cheese, then licked my finger clean. Despite my mother's forgetfulness, it had been some of her best lasagna.

Mom and Dad returned shortly after that, while I was still struggling with the pan.

"Well, do you like your new friend?" Mom asked.

I shrugged. "Yeah, he's cool," I answered nonchalantly as I scrubbed at the corner of the cookware.

"Good," Mom said. "I think we'll be having the Rileys over again soon."

I hoped Lenny would be back soon. He was neat and, after all, we had Pokémon to trade.

* * *

Lenny showed up the very next day. I was washing Dad's Hyundai in the driveway when I spotted him walking toward me. He waved and I waved back, forgetting about the garden hose in my hand. My dog, Calvin, yelped in surprise at the sudden assault. He wasted no time running back inside the house, where he was out of the evil water lord's domain.

"Neat dog. What kind is he?" Lenny inquired.

I shrugged. "Ionno." I frowned in thought. "Some kind of terrier. His name's Calvin."

"Calvin? That's weird."

"No, it's not! Calvin's a cool name," I retorted. "I named him after Calvin and Hobbes." I paused, then grinned. "Did you bring your Game Boy so we can trade Pokémon?"

Lenny shook his head. "Naw, I forgot. Sorry. I'll bring it tomorrow."

I put my hands on my hips and scowled. "I wanted to trade today. I hope you remember it tomorrow," I scolded.

Lenny shrugged and changed the subject. "Hey, have you seen the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles movie yet? It looks *cool*!"

I sighed. "Not yet. Dad hasn't rented it yet. I keep asking him but he doesn't want to spend five bucks on it right now." I paused for a beat as I had a sudden brainstorm. "Do you want to play Ninja Turtles on my Nintendo?"

Lenny beamed. "Yeah. That sounds awesome!"

I hurried inside with Lenny in tow, dropping the hose and forgetting all about Dad's car. I popped the cartridge into the NES after blowing on the connectors to get the dust off.

Lenny picked up the first-player controller while I turned the console on. Glaring at him, I put my hands on my hips. "No, *I* get to be the first player. It's my game," I scolded Lenny. He set the controller down, disappointed.

As we played, we debated which Ninja Turtle we would be and why. "I'd be Michelangelo," I boasted, "so I could beat up the Foot Clan with my nunchucks!"

"Well, I'd be Donatello, using his big fighting stick to wipe out five bad guys at once!" Lenny returned.

"Or I could be Leonardo and cut them in half with my razor-sharp sword!" I burst out.

"Aww, yeah! I wanna be Leonardo!" Lenny exclaimed.

"No way. I called it first," I stated in a tone that left no room for discussion.

We argued over who would be Master Splinter and who would defeat The Shredder to rescue April as we played. Looking back on it now, it seems that I always had to be in charge and I always had to get the last word.

* * *

Months passed, and Lenny had been coming over nearly every day. Most of the days that he didn't come over, I went over to his house to play. We hung out until dinnertime most days. Now and then, I'd let him choose what we would do, but an overwhelming majority of the time, I demanded that we play games of my choice.

The only thing that bothered me about Lenny was his sensitivity. Sometimes he would overreact or burst into tears for no reason at all. I tried not to laugh at him for it, but I was a stupid kid. I wasn't as good a friend to Lenny as he was to me.

When we pretended to be karate masters, I was always the good guy (and thus the winner). When we played Army, I was the American and Lenny was the Vietnamese/Iraqi/Russian. I didn't realize it back then, but I was far too rough with him, especially during our karate matches. Mistreating your friends will come back to haunt you, as I would soon discover.

* * *

A week later, I got off the faded yellow school bus and walked the short distance home. As soon as I reached my driveway, I ran inside and tossed my backpack on my bed. I was looking forward to the afternoon with Lenny. Since he wasn't over here, it was my turn to go to his house. I hoped we could trade Pokémon again. I had a few new ones that I knew he'd been trying to find.

"Bye, Mom! I'm going to Lenny's," I called out, racing to the front door with my Game Boy in my pocket. Right as I gripped the doorknob, my mother's shaky voice reverberated throughout the house, stopping me dead in my tracks.

"Eddie?" she sobbed. "Eddie, please come here. Please. I need to talk to you."

I was confused. I hated it when Mom cried, but this time I didn't even know *why* she was crying. I ran into her bedroom. "Mom! Mom, are you okay? What's wrong?" I asked worriedly, throwing my arms around her.

Mom pulled back a little bit, looking me in the eyes with two emeralds at the bottom of the Atlantic. "Eddie...I don't know how to tell you this..." she trailed off, sobbing hysterically and wiping her face with a wrinkled sleeve. I hugged her tightly, wondering what had wounded her so deeply. I thought about Dad. *Oh, God, no!*

Mom continued, interrupting my thoughts. "Eddie, it's...it's Lenny. He...he got home early from school today. He and Jarrod were rough-housing and taking turns jumping off his loft bed. Somehow, a belt...a belt got caught around his neck. He didn't make it..."

I was devastated. My mind was reeling, my head spinning like a cyclone. I just gaped in disbelief. "He's...he's dead? No. No! You're lying! You're lying!" I wailed as I thrashed around.

Mom hugged me tightly, pinning my arms to my sides. "I'm so sorry, Eddie," she whispered in my ear, still crying. "I know how much he meant to you."

Furious, I refused to believe her. "No. No! You're just mad that I'm always playing with Lenny and I don't play as many family games as I used to! I hate you! I hate you!" I tried to wriggle out of Mom's grasp, but I couldn't. Life without Lenny? Could it even be possible?

Slowly but surely, like a salve applied to a vicious burn, the truth in her words began to sink in. My body went numb and my eyes were old faucets that had suddenly sprung leaks. I sagged, my body going limp as the tears gushed forth. Mom relaxed her grip to a comforting embrace and kissed my forehead softly; she dabbed at my eyes with the hem of her blouse.

I cried and cried. I felt like life as I knew it was over. Strictly speaking, it was – I'd have to cope with it and adapt.

Devastated, I pulled away from Mom and ran to my bedroom, slamming the door behind me. I shoved everything on my bed onto the floor and threw myself face-down onto my bed, staining my sheets with the evidence of my sorrow. There came a soft knocking at the door.

"Go away!" I wailed into my pillow. I heard Mom sigh audibly. "Go away!" I repeated. I kept crying onto my sheets. A moment later, her footsteps echoed in the hall, leading away from my room. I returned to my grief, crying myself to sleep.

* * *

I'd thought Lenny and I would be best friends forever. The cut was deep, all the way to the bone, and still bleeding. Would it ever heal? You can buy bandages for your fingers and toes, but there is no bandage for a broken heart.

Lenny's funeral was held that Friday at Hollomon-Brown Funeral Home. My parents had written a note to the school to have me excused from class, and the principal had had no objections. This was one of the few times, however, that I wished I *was* in school. Anything would have been better than my best friend dying.

We arrived at the funeral home, a modest building with different shrubs growing all around the building and a sign out front identifying the funeral parlor. It looked clean and professional. By this time, however, the severity and finality of the situation had set in, and I was numb.

I followed Mom and Dad inside to the visitation room and we took three adjacent seats in the center of the section to the right of the casket. The chairs were the metal folding type without padding on the backs or seats. The light scent of carnations was in the air, though it didn't register at the time.

Once everyone had filed in and taken their seats, Lenny's service began. The minister, Reverend Norman Reed, gave the eulogy. He used his extensive arm-span and deep voice to extol the virtues of my late friend. The eulogy was brief, though, as Lenny's life had ended almost before it began.

Reverend Reed asked if anyone wanted to say a few words to honor or memorialize Lenny. I wanted to talk about him, about the good times we'd had. I wanted to apologize to him and his parents. I wanted to tell everyone how much Lenny meant to me, but I was nervous about speaking in front of dozens of people I didn't know.

Mr. and Mrs. Riley slowly stood and walked to the front of the assembly. Mrs. Riley leaned over her son, her face covered in teardrops, and softly kissed him on the cheek. She then whispered something in his ear. Mrs. Riley faced the crowd again, and they talked about how much they loved and missed him, what a great child he was, and the things he loved to do the most.

One by one, other friends of the Riley family (including some of Lenny's classmates) took their turns up front to speak. They shared memories and tales about Lenny and how much fun he was to be around. I never made my pilgrimage to the front, though. I was a coward.

Once everyone who wanted to speak had the opportunity to do so, we all lined up single-file to view Lenny's body and pay our final respects. Mom, Dad, and I were near the back of the line. Slowly, the line advanced, and we approached my friend.

Once I reached Lenny's coffin, my eyes welled up again. Lenny was laid out in an elegant wooden casket with a white lining, filled with white pillows, and he was dressed in a navy blue suit with a golden tie.

Lenny seemed at peace. He could've been asleep, planning our next Pokémon battle or game of Uno. More than anything, I wanted to give him a big bear hug and wake him up. This couldn't be real – but it was.

I snapped out of it and reached down, resting a hand gently on my fallen friend's shoulder. "I'm sorry, Lenny," I whispered. "I'm so sorry."

Carefully, I withdrew two items from my pocket: Lenny's Pokémon Red game cartridge and my own Pokémon Blue cartridge. I gently lifted one of his hands from his chest, slipped the games under it, and rested his hand on top of the games.

I sighed, unable to look upon my fallen friend any longer. My parents paid their respects; as soon as they finished, I begged them to take me home.

There was little conversation on our long ride home. I couldn't get Lenny off my mind. He'd looked too peaceful, too at ease. I leaned against the door, my face pressed against the cold glass of the window, and wondered what cruel twist of fate had caused the train of Lenny's life to jump the tracks and plummet into the canyon of oblivion.

* * *

I didn't realize it back then, but after reflecting on those events from a fresh perspective, I now know that I was a bully. I was demanding, callous, rough, and thoughtless toward my best friend. My best friend! How could I have treated so cruelly someone so undeserving of it? What drives a child with such responsible, loving parents to commit such harsh acts?

That was only the first of my worst sins. It may not have been *the* worst, but that's no excuse for my behavior. I should've treated Lenny with dignity, kindness, and respect. Lenny had treated me well and deserved nothing less in return.

Looking back on it now, I believe that Lenny intentionally took his own life. My bullying had wounded him so deeply that he killed himself simply to bring his suffering to an end. I never want to treat a human being that way again. No matter where I go or what I do, Lenny's crimson blood will forevermore stain my irresponsible hands.

Chapter 3 - The (Competitive) Spirit Compels You

I've always had a fiercely competitive spirit. It always motivates me to be my best, at any cost. I'm good at what I do, and I despise losing. I've been that way for as far back as I can remember. That's just how I was raised.

Oftentimes, when I lose any kind of competition, I get mad or frustrated. I hate losing, and that stokes the fire in my competitive furnace, keeping me going. I do whatever I must – train, practice, research – to get or maintain the edge. Anything worth doing is worth doing to the best of your ability – why waste your time if you aren't going to give it everything you have?

* * *

It still feels like it was only yesterday. I was thirteen, and I was excited about the upcoming Little League season. Little League rules stated that you could play until you turned fourteen. You could then finish a season you'd already begun, but you couldn't begin a new one.

That season would be my sixth (and final) year of Little League. Between it and the T-Ball I'd played, I'd become a respected (and feared) player. I was going to miss Little League once I was no longer eligible to play.

Thus far, each team I'd been part of had done well, usually securing first place. Twice, though, my teams had been relegated to second place; anything other than the top slot was a tremendous letdown. I was determined to "retire" in first place, with one final MVP trophy on my shelf.

* * *

We had another fearsome team in my final year, and our coach was Mr. Davies, a coach I'd had during two of my first-place years. I knew his coaching style and he knew my playing style – a definite advantage over the coaches who were working with unfamiliar players. We also had Todd Jenkins, a great first baseman and prior teammate, on the team. We were ready to rock.

The coaches had the honor of naming their teams. Coach Davies named us the Tigers. He *always* named his teams the Tigers. We'd do everything short of growing orange fur to live up to our name.

As Little Leaguers approached the division with the oldest players, they played progressively more games during the season. Though I'd started out with a six-game season, I was now on a thirteen-game schedule (seven innings each), not including playoffs.

We practiced hard twice a week but we played the games even harder. Between the Tuesday and Thursday practices and the Saturday games, I ate, slept, and breathed baseball.

* * *

Our team started the year strong, winning four of our first five games, but we dropped the following game to our rivals, the Royals. Their outstanding team was off to a 6-0 start, while we only had a record of 4-2. That was fine, though. We didn't have to have the best record during the regular season. We just had to bone up on our fundamentals and win in the playoffs at the end of the season.

Over the course of the next few weeks we battled back hard, getting our record up to 8-2. Meanwhile, the Royals were still undefeated, sitting in the catbird seat with a record of 10-0. Due to the limited number of teams, we had to play most teams twice. In the upcoming week, the Royals would once again be our adversary.

One major thing had changed since our previous meeting: we had acquired a sharp new pitcher named Kyle Waters. He could fire a seventy-mile-per-hour heater, and he also had a good change-up and a decent slider. His delivery wasn't entirely consistent, but when he was on, he showed shades of Chris Carpenter.

This was the final game of the year that we expected to be challenging, and we needed a win. We'd most likely face the Royals in the playoffs, so a momentum shift from an upset win was crucial. Coach Davies called the entire squad in on Friday for an extra practice session and a scrimmage. Kyle polished his delivery, while the rest of us practiced batting, catching, and throwing.

* * *

Saturday saw clear skies, a cool breeze, and high hopes that the Tigers would prevail over the undefeated Royals. There was a nice turnout for the game – more than sixty parents and friends of the players packed the cold metal bleachers to watch the rematch. We were excited; they were excited. Our coach got us fired up with a passionate speech about teamwork, devotion, sacrifice, and dedication. We took the field, pumped up and ready to play ball.

* * *

The din inside the Pizza Hut was deafening. I grabbed a third slice of the Supreme pizza laid out before me, as the aromas of melted mozzarella cheese, baked bell peppers, and crispy pepperoni mingled with the scents of other savory foods and toppings.

I chomped on the delicacy greedily as jubilant cheers and endless laughter resonated throughout the eatery. A couple of my teammates were playing tag, running around and (sometimes unsuccessfully) dodging tables and patrons. We'd won! In a very tight game, our ace, Kyle, had been the deciding factor.

The final score had been 2-1. We hadn't been able to score much against the Royals' defense, but our own fielding hadn't been too shabby, either. The Royals got more hits, but our great pitching and fielding led to a whopping four double-plays. Those double-plays were the final pieces of the puzzle.

As you probably guessed, the Royals didn't like being handed their first loss. Their coach vowed to demolish us in the playoffs. We would just have to wait and see.

* * *

As most of us had predicted, the remainder of the season was uneventful. We chalked up the rest of our games in the "win" column, ending the regular season with an impressive record of 11-2. We'd given the Royals their sole loss, and they ended the season with a 12-1 record. Thus, they were the number one seed in the playoffs, while we were the number two seed. Due to the fact that there were nine teams playing, only the eighth and ninth seeds played in the first round – all the other teams had a "bye" week. That brought the rest of us to the round of eight.

We trounced the Jays in our first playoff matchup, scoring nine runs while holding the Jays to one run. Our team faced the Orioles, and stiffer competition, in the following round, but we pulled out a 5-2 victory.

Meanwhile, the Royals routed the Rangers and smashed the Sox to meet us in the finals. It was all but expected, yet it served to heighten the tension and rivalry before the final rematch between the top two teams in Little League baseball.

* * *

After much anticipation, the big day arrived at last. The cool September breeze brought the scents of buttered popcorn, Oscar Mayer hot dogs, and Cracker Jack to the noses of everyone in attendance. A young boy with a baseball mitt munched on a cherry Sno-cone, his reward for turning in a foul ball. The record crowd of onlookers murmured as game time approached. Spectators filled the aluminum bleachers, leaving more than two dozen others standing along the fences.

We were mere hours from discovering if all the practice and hard work would pay off in the form of a first-place trophy. Coach Davies didn't give us the usual pre-game spiel about having fun and it not mattering whether we won or lost. This day was huge, and he was as pumped up as we were.

We gathered in the huddle and the coach looked around at each of us in turn, eye to eye. Once he had looked into the eyes of the last of us, he rumbled, "You guys are ready. There's not an ounce of quit in any one of you. Now go out there and give 'em hell!" We roared and took the field, the Scots ready to decimate the English who were invading their diamond.

* * *

The game got underway, and it was a pitcher's duel. Both teams had their aces on the mound, and both were shining brighter than the sun. Few players managed to reach first base.

In the fourth inning, however, the Royals were able to load the bags with only one out, a precarious situation. Fortunately, Kyle struck out the next batter with an outside slider and forced the following batter to pop the ball up to left field, where Chuck was ready and waiting. That got us out of the inning. After five full innings of play, the score remained tied, zeroes on both sides.

Then came the top of the sixth, the next-to-last inning in regulation play. I watched the action from right field, glove at the ready, as I squinted into the late afternoon sun. Kyle retired the first two batters who stepped up to the plate, but the third managed to split the gap in left-center field and get a double.

That brought Kevin Phelps, one of the Royals' best hitters, to the plate. The kid was so beefy that it was hard to believe he was only thirteen. He chomped his Big League Chew bubblegum and spat outside the batter's box, then dug in, took two practice swings, and awaited Kyle's delivery.

Kyle's first pitch was a blistering fastball low and on the outside edge of the plate. Kevin took it for a strike. The catcher tossed the ball back to Kyle, who then stared Kevin down. Kyle checked the runner, then wound up and delivered his next pitch – a bad change-up that hung right over the plate and had "Return to Sender" stamped on it.

Kevin smashed the ball; it soared through the air toward me. I tried to shield my eyes, but I lost the ball in the sun. It smacked into the grass a few feet behind me. I spun around and dashed for it as their base-runner rounded third to score.

As soon as I had a hand on the ball, I hurled the ivory orb to second base. We held Kevin there, unable to advance to third. Kyle struck the next batter out, but the damage had been done. The Royals had the first lead of the game, 1-0.

Unfortunately, we were unable to score in our half of the inning, but Kyle locked the Royals down in the top of a tense seventh. This was our last chance: do or die. Working against us was the fact that we had the bottom of the order coming up. Due up were Brody, me, and Kyle. *Uh-oh.*

Brody stepped into the batter's box and took his practice cuts. The Royals pitcher didn't execute on his pitches, though, and Brody knocked a hanging curveball up the middle for a single.

As Brody took a lead, I stepped into the batter's box, glaring at their pitcher. I tapped the dish with my bat, took three practice swings, and ground the heel of my right cleat into the orange-tinged soil.

The pitcher sized me up, wound up, and threw the first pitch of my at-bat. His offering was a weak, unconvincing curveball. I laid off it and it hit the catcher's mitt a foot off the plate. Ball one.

I stepped out of the box, adjusted my grip on the black Louisville Slugger, took a practice swing, then returned to the box. Their pitcher nodded at the catcher, then delivered his next pitch. The fastball soared wildly over our heads. I hit the dirt while Brody hot-footed it to second without drawing a throw. Ball two.

My mind raced – I had a batter's count. He would have to start pitching to me or risk putting too many people on base with no outs. His next pitch was another curveball, a bit low, but I took a swipe at it anyway. The ball fouled off to the right; I scowled, realizing that I should've let the pitch go.

His next pitch was a fastball, but everything was in slow motion to me. I watched the baseball, slowly spinning as it hurtled toward me, in perfect clarity: seams, scratches, and dirt marks. He'd made a critical mistake and left the fastball just inside the center of the plate, waist-high – right in my wheelhouse.

I swung the bat in bullet time. There was a deafening CRACK as my energy transferred from the Slugger to the baseball. The ball rocketed to left field. As the left-fielder ran for the ball, it ricocheted off the chain-link fence. I rounded first as the fielder hurled the ball back to the infield. Brody scored, so I stayed at first just to play it safe. Our teams were now tied with one run each.

I looked to Coach Davies in the first-base coach's box. He clapped me on the shoulder.

"Great job, Eddie! Good hit and great hustle. Now we gotta let Kyle get you home."

"Can I steal second?" I asked him quietly. I'd attempted only six steals during the season, but I'd not been thrown out or picked off even once.

He grinned at me and shook his head. "Your call, champ. You can really turn on the afterburners when you try. Just don't get out."

I nodded and took a fairly large lead. Stealing was a risky play here. We still had three outs to get me home and win. If I were to get thrown out, we'd have only two outs left with no runners on base and no good hitters due up. Then again, none of the next three batters were likely to drive me home from first, either. I decided to keep an eye on the pitcher and see how vigilant he was.

Their ace was more concerned about throwing strikes than keeping me close to the bag. Kyle was up, so it was pitcher versus pitcher. Kyle dug in and let the first pitch, an inside fastball that *just* missed the plate, go by. I figured that this guy wouldn't throw two fastballs in a row, and decided to run on the next pitch.

As he wound up to deliver his pitch, I took off toward second base. The crowd was at a fever pitch as I sprinted toward that beautiful white square. I was right – the pitch was a change-up. Though their catcher got rid of the ball as soon as he got it, he never had a chance.

I slid head-first to the outside of the bag, easily beating the throw. I stood and brushed myself off as the crowd – and my team – roared. I was safe, and in scoring position.

The steal rattled their pitcher, and the wheels came off for him. His next pitch was a weak curveball that Kyle slapped to left field. I had to play it safe and let the ball drop before I could take off for third base. It fell between the left fielder and center fielder and I ran for third.

As I reached third base, I looked over my shoulder to see the center fielder scooping up the ball. I couldn't resist taking the chance, and I rounded third, blowing through the stop sign, panting and heaving. As I headed to home plate, everything was quiet in my head, save the pounding of my heart in my ears.

Right as I prepared to slide in, the ball landed in the catcher's mitt and he blocked my way. Past the point of no return, I gritted my teeth and steamrolled their catcher. We both toppled over onto home plate – and the ball tumbled from his glove as he pulled his arms back and attempted to break his own fall.

"Safe!" screamed the umpire, gesturing emphatically. The ballpark rang out with applause and cheers. We'd done it! The Tigers had won the championship and the bragging rights. I felt exuberant. It's always good to retire at the top of your game.

* * *

We had ice cream and cake that evening to commemorate our ultimate victory, and Coach Davies gave a heartfelt speech thanking us for our hard work and dedication, telling us how much fun he'd had while coaching us.

The night passed too quickly, and I don't remember everything about it. I do remember the smiles, the laughter, and the cheer, though. Damn, it feels good to be a winner.

Chapter 4 - Family Matters

Everyone has to sacrifice now and then to get something they want. That's just part of life and growing up. You no longer get everything handed to you on a platinum platter. Before you surrender something you can't get back, though, make sure there are no hidden costs. Once an opportunity is lost, just like wrecking your dream car, you might never get another one like it.

* * *

"Well," Mom told me, "you really don't have to go camping with us if you don't want to. You can stay with Ted while your father and I camp for ten days, if you prefer, but we'd rather you came with us." She hugged me and smiled.

"Mom, I'm fourteen now. I don't want to go camping. I hate the bugs. I hate the trees. I hate having to put on nasty sun block and eat crappy food over a fire or the Coleman grill," I protested.

Mom looked hurt at my remarks. "I had no idea you felt that way about our family trips." She sighed. "I won't force you to come along on any more of them."

I instantly felt guilty and ashamed of myself. After all that Mom and Dad had done for me, I didn't have to act like that. I put my arms around Mom and squeezed lovingly. "Mom, I love you and Dad, and I promise we can do other stuff together. I just hate camping is all," I explained gently.

"I know, sweetie," she replied, "but you'll only be a child for a few more years, and we want to treasure these moments." She kissed my forehead softly and rubbed my hair.

"Okay, Mom," I relented. "Next time, I promise I'll go camping with you, but *please* let me stay with Uncle Ted this time," I pleaded.

She sighed again. "Alright. You always do like your trips to see him. I just hope he isn't spoiling you rotten with all the sweets and money." Mom rolled her eyes at me. "Well, are you going or not? Go pack your suitcase, and don't forget plenty of socks and underwear!"

"Of course not, Mom. I love you!" I gave her a quick hug and ran to my bedroom. Excitedly, I threw open my suitcase and began stuffing it with clothes.

* * *

Uncle Ted was always my favorite uncle. Slightly heavysset with a head full of dark brown hair, he was very friendly to everyone. Every time I visited him (which wasn't nearly as often as I'd have liked) he had a few dollars or a bowl of ice cream for me. By the time I'd return home, I'd have as much as twenty bucks.

Uncle Ted worked as a mechanic in Detroit, operating out of his own garage and auto shop where he and his crew rebuilt everything from Caddies to Hondas. Detroit kept Ted and his four employees busy, but he'd always take time off when I visited. The trip to Motor City was a long one, but worth it to see my favorite uncle.

* * *

I got off the Greyhound at the Detroit station and looked around. The station was on a block with lots of run-down buildings that had long since been abandoned. Few pedestrians walked the streets. Detroit's "Golden Age" had, sadly, passed it by more than a decade before.

I looked around anxiously for my uncle. He stood up from his metal bench inside the station. The kind bus driver who had brought me there, a middle-aged lady with her blond hair kept back in a ponytail, helped me locate my suitcases in the wide cargo bays underneath the bus.

Uncle Ted came outside, met me by the bus, and gave me a warm, welcoming hug. "Hey there, sport! It's great to see you again. How was the trip?"

I glanced around, finding nothing of interest to hold my gaze. "Mostly boring, but we made lots of stops for drinks and snacks. We did get to stop at a Hardee's, too, but I slept for most of the trip," I admitted.

"Well, that's okay," he said. "I'm an Arby's man, myself, for their savory roast beef. Maybe we can get some Beef 'n Cheddars before I have to give you back." He winked conspiratorially.

"With Horsey Sauce, of course," I added.

"Of course," he chuckled.

My uncle hoisted my suitcase and we walked to his black Honda. With all the money he made, it never ceased to amaze me that he drove such an economical car. I guess he just didn't want to be flashy. I opened the back door for him, and he shoved my bag into the car. We hopped inside.

"Well, Eddie, are you ready for your gift?" Uncle Ted asked. I nodded eagerly. He reached behind my seat and pulled out a medium-sized cardboard box, wrapped in holiday paper with a bow stuck on top. "Well, go on. Open it up," he urged.

I tore the wrapping paper from the box and lifted the lid. My jaw dropped at the sight I beheld: a brand-new Rawlings baseball glove. Thanks to all the Little League I'd played, my old glove was completely worn out, and I'd been wanting a new one to try out for the school team. I turned to face him.

"Oh, thank you! Thanks so much!" I blurted out, grateful for the gift.

"Don't mention it," he smiled as we took off for his house.

We chatted nonstop during the fifteen-minute trip from the bus station to my uncle's house. I didn't care much for Detroit in general, though. Everywhere I looked, there were old buildings in desperate need of renovation. We passed a toy factory; it was surrounded by an eight-foot-tall chain-link fence topped with razor wire. Detroit needed some serious TLC (or a team of bulldozers).

Finally, we arrived at Uncle Ted's cozy one-story home. His lawn was surprisingly well-kept and, unusual for a mechanic, the driveway was clean and there were no vehicles up on blocks anywhere. Now that I think about it, that was unusual for *anyone* in Detroit. Uncle Ted even lined the front of his house with rose bushes – they were still in bloom, though they wouldn't be for much longer.

Uncle Ted grabbed my suitcase and we headed inside. He showed me to the spare bedroom, where the bed was already made, and I unpacked my things. Once I'd finished making myself at home, I rejoined my uncle in the kitchen, where he was just putting the finishing touches on a batch of Hamburger Helper. We ate up, then he did the dishes while I played Super Mario World on his Super Nintendo.

Before long, it was bedtime. I lay down in bed as he turned off the lights. As I pulled the covers tight, I imagined what a wonderful trip this was going to be, until the Sandman accosted me and stole my wakefulness.

* * *

It wasn't until my second full day with Uncle Ted that I started to become uncomfortable around him. We'd mostly played catch and some video games to pass the time, but we'd also gone to the park to play basketball. That evening, though, was destined to be one that I would never forget – and not in a good way.

"C'mere, sport," Uncle Ted called out from his bedroom.

"Just a minute! Let me finish this level," I called back.

"Hurry up!" he yelled.

I hurriedly finished the sixth castle on Super Mario World and saved my game. I set the controller down and ran to my uncle's bedroom. He was sitting on the edge of his bed, several magazines spread out before him.

"Shut the door and come here," he commanded. I warily obeyed. He looked at me intently. "Have your parents told you about the birds and the bees yet?" I gulped and nodded hesitantly. He leaned over and slid an open magazine in front of me. "Look at this."

I stared at the large picture on the page before me. It was a disgusting picture of a man and a boy; I was repulsed and confused. This wasn't anything like the way my parents and friends had described it.

"Eww! What is this?" I asked in disbelief.

"Oh, this is normal," he lied. "When a man and a boy love each other, they do things like this."

I wasn't sure what to make of it. The boy didn't seem to be enjoying what they were doing.

"I don't think he likes it," I stated, matter-of-factly.

"He's just getting used to it is all," Uncle Ted explained. "Aren't your video games more fun after you practice and get better at them?"

I was still dubious. Nothing about it seemed right. Uncle Ted showed me more pictures from his magazines, but I didn't like them one bit more than the first picture. I told him so, and he got upset.

"I'm just trying to educate you," he blustered. "Don't I always buy you things and treat you good? This is how you repay me?"

I felt ashamed of myself for getting snippy. He was right, of course. He treated me well, and he was older and wiser than I was. Maybe he just knew better.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I just don't understand why they would do that. It's gross." I shuddered.

My uncle shrugged. "A lot of things are gross until you get used to them. Goat milk seems gross to drink at first. Bugs are gross until you are around them more – then they are just annoying." Uncle Ted surveyed me for a moment before continuing. "Okay, go play your game." Relieved, I ran back to the living room, grabbed the controller, and picked up my game where I left off.

* * *

The following day, Uncle Ted called me back into his bedroom and exposed me to dozens more of his pictures and a few videotapes. As he flipped through the material, I still didn't like what I saw. I didn't want to hurt his feelings again, though. He *was* my favorite uncle.

"You see all these people that play that game?" he lectured. "Now you know that it's perfectly normal for men and boys to do this."

I silently bowed my head. I was trapped – I couldn't agree with him, but I didn't want to argue, either. I just did my best to tune him out, nodding along with him as he continued on. Finally, he let me get back to my games. I was thankful to get out of that awkward situation again, if only for the moment.

* * *

That night, I awoke to my uncle shaking my shoulder. I sat up drowsily and rubbed my eyes.

"Mmm? What's going on? Why did you wake me up?" I asked, yawning and stretching.

He smiled and put his hands on my shoulders, squeezing gently. "I want to play a game with you."

My heart stopped and my stomach churned. "What...what kind of game?" I asked timidly, fearing the answer.

"You know what game," he replied, smirking.

I threw his hands off my shoulders and jumped out of bed, onto the carpeted floor. "No! I'm not doing that!" I shouted defiantly.

Uncle Ted paused, then shook his head sadly. "All I do for you, and this is how you act? Do you even care about me at all?" he quietly asked.

"Oh, no. You ain't gonna guilt-trip *me* into doing that!" I fired back. "That's gross and it's not normal. I'm telling Mom!" I threatened.

"Really?" he sneered, all semblance of kindness having departed. "How about I tell your mother that I caught you doing drugs? I could easily hide some pot in your things or tell her that I confiscated it from you. Who do you think she will believe, you or me?"

I grew angry. I felt used, helpless, and worthless. I was a piece of meat to be bought and sold. Worst of all, though, was that I believed my uncle was right. He was an adult, a friend of the family, and I was certain his word would be taken over mine.

I took a deep breath and sighed, exhaling quietly, knowing that I was defeated. "Fine, you win." The anger subsided, and shame and humiliation washed over me.

* * *

I was ashamed, red-faced, and horrified. I felt like I was dying; I prayed that I *would*. Nothing in my entire life had made me feel so dirty, worthless, and abused. My uncle had ripped my innocence from me like a tornado shredding the siding off an old house.

As soon as he left, I lay motionless and cried, still in excruciating pain. My tears were the Mississippi River, flooding the Great Plains of my sheets. My trust in Uncle Ted was shattered, irreparable.

I crawled slowly to the bathroom and carefully climbed into the bathtub, wincing in pain. I turned on the shower gingerly and lay at the end of the tub, sobbing in the fetal position in the downpour.

After what seemed like hours, I frantically grabbed the bar of soap and scrubbed myself over and over and over under the scalding water. I still didn't feel clean. I doubted that I'd *ever* feel clean again.

* * *

My uncle "visited" me every night after that for the rest of my stay. I dreaded his late-night calls more than anything. I couldn't stand the sight of him, his hot breath on my neck, his hands on me, the way he laughed, the smell of his sweat mixed with gas station cologne.

Each night, I imagined that I was someone else, somewhere else – anything to try and cope with it so that I wouldn't have to face the horrid truth. The truth that my uncle raped me.

* * *

Mom and Dad didn't know why I was so quiet after my trip. They suspected that something had happened, but they had no idea what, and I refused to talk about it. Dad never pressed the issue, but Mom would bring it up now and then. I'd always deflect the questions and change the subject.

Five years after that, Uncle Ted was arrested and charged with several counts of sexual assault against six boys ranging in age from eight to fifteen. On the advice of his lawyer, he copped a plea that dropped two of the six counts against him and recommended a sentence toward the lower end of the sentencing range. The judge handed down a sentence of eleven years, but the man who ruined my childhood and stole my innocence served only four and a half years before he was released from Mound Correctional Facility.

I never did visit Uncle Ted after that fateful vacation. After his arrest, my parents suspected that he'd done something to me, but I never told them. It was too filthy, degrading, and painful to relive those nightmares. I kept it bottled up inside, but now that I've confided it in you, my burden feels lighter.

So now you know my second sin. I understand that what he did to me wasn't my fault. It *was* my fault, however, that I kept quiet and never told anyone. I didn't think my parents could

ever love me again if they found out that I had been used in such a vile manner. I didn't trust my parents enough to know they would love me forever, no matter what. I was wrong. Nothing I could ever do – and nothing done to me – would stop my parents from loving me.

If I had only told them – or *any* responsible adult, for that matter – Uncle Ted might have been put in jail before he could harm all those other boys. Instead, he remained free for years to torment others.

Do I hate him? I used to. I used to wish that he would die a slow, painful, torturous death. I used to wish that *I* would die, as well.

As time went on, though, I realized that I was enslaved by my own hatred and grief. To move on and grow, I had to let my anger go. It wasn't easy, but it was necessary, for my *own* well-being, if nothing else. If you harbor anger and hate, it will consume you, leaving nothing behind but the anger and an empty shell of an existence.

Chapter 5 - Danny Boy

It feels like only yesterday – bouncing on Daniel's trampoline in his backyard as the autumn wind brought golden, maroon, and burgundy oak leaves down all around us. We were laughing and playing dodgeball on the trampoline as the sun reflected off the surface of the Atlantic Ocean, just outside the Chesapeake Bay, directly behind his parents' property.

Daniel Lanscomb was a taller, heavysset kid with glasses and dark brown hair and eyes. He had two younger brothers, too. With his great attitude and winning personality, he was a good guy. Unfortunately, he was also shy around strangers, but I didn't let that discourage me from befriending him.

* * *

I first met Daniel on the school bus shortly after he'd moved into the neighborhood, two streets over from me. He was sitting toward the back of the bus, near the middle seats where I usually sat. Since part of the seat beside him was empty, I plopped down.

"Hi. I'm Eddie," I informed the newcomer as I stuck my hand out.

The other boy grinned and shook my hand. "Hi, Eddie. I'm Daniel. My family just moved here from Herndon."

"Oh! That's pretty far away. Nice to meet you," I replied.

We kept talking for the rest of the trip to school. Daniel ended up inviting me to come over and hang out at his house after school; I happily accepted. The rest of the school day was spent wondering what his house was like and what exactly we'd do when I got there.

* * *

That afternoon couldn't come soon enough. As soon as I got home, I ran inside and told Mom and Dad about my new friend. They gave me permission to go over to his house, so I hopped onto my worn Huffy ten-speed and pedaled rapidly to Daniel's house.

His new home was a nice three-bedroom brick house with a moderately-sized front yard and a one-and-a-half acre backyard that overlooked the Atlantic Ocean.

Two boys were wrestling in the front yard as I pulled into the driveway. I hadn't met them before, so they paused their match and introduced themselves. Their names were Matt and Jason, and they were Daniel's younger brothers.

While Daniel and I were sixteen, Matt was twelve and Jason was ten. I imagined that their mom would freak out when she saw the grass stains on their light-colored T-shirts and blue jeans. Mine would've.

"Is Daniel home?" I asked.

Jason nodded and ran around to the backyard, so I followed him. Jason pointed, and I spotted Daniel out by the dock, cleaning an aluminum rowboat. I waved, but he didn't see me, so I walked out to meet him. When I got there, Daniel had his back to me, so I slapped him on it.

"Whoa, dude. There you are!" he laughed.

"Hey. What are you up to?" I asked.

"Scrubbing and hosing down Dad's old fishing boat," he explained. "I can play as soon as I'm finished."

"Okay, cool. Want some help?" I offered.

"Yeah, sure, that'd be great. If you want, just grab that hose over there," Daniel pointed, "and spray it wherever I'm scrubbing."

I did as Daniel asked and the job was done in no time. After we put everything away, we went to his back porch and he grabbed a deck of cards. We pulled out the plastic chairs around the large plastic table and began to play. Daniel grabbed some Mountain Dews from the fridge and offered me one. We played cards and drank soda until it got dark and I had to return home.

* * *

We hung out nearly every day after that. Usually, we stayed at Daniel's house, but sometimes we spent the day at my own place. At his house, we'd jump on his trampoline and play card games, dodgeball, and croquet.

His yard also bordered the woods, so we'd explore them now and then. There were worn paths through the trees, but once you went deep enough into the woods, there was nothing but overgrowth. We loved to explore the woods and see what we could find.

One time we stumbled upon a cache of old tires. They were dirty, but dry, so we decided to play with them. First, we lined them up and did football drills through them. After that, we stood several of them up side-by-side and I crawled into the center of the tube of tires.

Daniel pushed the row of tires (and me) down a hill and toward the muddy pit at the bottom. The tires hit a rock and scattered like birdshot from a twelve-gauge, sending me sliding through the mud on my back. We got some laughs out of it, and I convinced him to take a turn. Once Daniel had done it, we kicked the remaining few tires down the hill and watched them bounce and tumble straight into the mud.

Sometimes, we'd pretend that the woods were ancient Mayan ruins and that we were in search of the treasures in a lost temple. Maybe we were a bit old for that, but we loved to use our imaginations – it was pure bliss for us. Daniel couldn't replace Lenny, but Daniel was a good friend; I always enjoyed the time we spent together.

* * *

One memory that stands out would have to be the time we snuck out of English 11 class to ditch school. Our regular teacher, Mrs. Price, was sick that day. Our substitute teacher was clearly not at the top of her game. Mrs. Hansen was timid and elderly, clearly not versed on the subject at hand; instead of normal textbook assignments, she just passed out worksheets to do.

She'd done roll call at the start of class, but she kept ducking out to do errands, hit the bottle, or whatever. Before long, Adam decided he was going to ditch and told Ben to come with him. I asked Adam if Daniel and I could come along; Adam consented, as long as we didn't get them busted.

"I don't know about this," Daniel said, hesitating. "What if we get caught?"

"How are we gonna get caught?" I retorted. "She already marked us 'present'. Do you think she's gonna do another roll call?"

Daniel furrowed his brow. "No, I guess not," he admitted. "Let's just go before I lose my nerve."

The teacher chose that precise moment to return, so we had to put our plan on hold for the moment. She sat at her desk and looked around the room. All of us pretended to do our worksheets, scribbling furiously. As soon as she got up and walked out a few minutes later, Ben stalked over to the large window. He slid the latch to unlock the casement and swung it wide open.

First, Adam stooped and exited through the low window. Ben left next. Daniel followed Ben out, and I brought up the rear as I clutched my backpack to my chest. Once I was clear of the window, our lookout closed and latched it behind us.

The next step in the plan was to cross the parking lot in front of the school to get to Adam's car. We nonchalantly ambled between the cars, keeping plenty of distance between us and the double doors of the school. Adam unlocked the doors of his dirty little Honda and we slipped inside. Adam carefully pulled out of the lot and onto the highway.

We joked around, chuckling about our little caper. A moment later, Adam glanced at the fuel gauge; the orange needle was sitting on the "E." "Guys, we gotta hit the Shell station and fill up," he announced. We murmured our assent. We all wanted sodas and snacks, anyway.

When we arrived at the Shell station, Adam pulled up to pump four. The rest of us pitched in a few bucks for gas and snacks while Adam filled up the tank. Right as we were about to go inside, though, a sheriff pulled up on the other side of our pump.

The sheriff got out of his car and looked at us from behind his aviator-style sunglasses. We smiled and nodded at him, then entered the store. Either he didn't realize that we were supposed to be in school, or he didn't care. Either way, we didn't dare take an easy breath until we'd piled back into Adam's dirty little car.

"You couldn't even wash your ride? Your back windshield has 'Wash Me' on it, and they have squeegees here," Ben teased. Adam responded with a single upraised finger. I tossed a bag of Cheetos and a Wild Cherry Pepsi to Adam, and we headed home.

Adam dropped Daniel and me off at my house. I was home rather early, but Mom and Dad were out shopping. What they didn't know wouldn't hurt me.

They were picking up some things for Easter that I wasn't supposed to know about. Tough cookies. I did. Daniel and I continued laughing and joking as we headed to his house for Spades and more caffeine.

* * *

An important lesson I learned from this was to never judge a book by its cover. It's a cliché, but it's true. If I'd decided that Daniel didn't look cool and I didn't talk to him, I'd have missed out on a good person and a great friend.

When you see someone that looks different – tattoos, piercings, different skin color, a hairstyle you don't like – don't write them off. Give them a chance. If you don't give them that chance, you just might miss out on the best friend you'd have ever had, or even the love of your life.

Chapter 6 - Higher Education

Water pressure at five hundred feet below sea level is strong. The pressure at the Earth's core is far greater. Both of these, however, pale in comparison to the power of peer pressure. Peer pressure can cause an ordinary person to do something they'd otherwise never *consider* doing. This was my third sin.

* * *

Back when I was sixteen, I was friends with a neighborhood kid named Pete. Pete wasn't much fun, but he had an older brother named Cliff. Cliff was twenty and one of the "cool kids." He had his own car and he didn't respect authority. Everyone wanted to be like Cliff.

One afternoon when Mom and Dad weren't home, I rode my bike to Pete's house. He wasn't home, but Cliff was. I asked him what he was up to, and he told me that he was about to go cruising around the downtown area.

"Can I come along?" I asked eagerly.

"Yeah, sure. You got some gas money?" Cliff asked.

I checked my pockets. "I got like ten bucks, but I wanna get a soda or something."

"That's cool, man. Gimme five so I can put a few gallons in her and let's roll."

I handed over a five and we got into his older black Oldsmobile. Cliff told me that we had to go scoop up Aaron, a friend of his, so I climbed over the seat into the back. We headed over to Aaron's house, picked him up, and drove to downtown Virginia Beach.

Virginia Beach wasn't a bad little city, all things considered. It had a somewhat urban vibe, but it wasn't that densely populated. Clusters of buildings sat here and there, but there were also quite a few gaps with empty lots and such. A few of the buildings were older and in need of a coat of paint, but most of them were new or nearly new; Virginia Beach wasn't nearly as rough-looking as Detroit.

At first, we just cruised slowly through town, seeing what there was to see. I took in the sights excitedly. I'd never seen much of Virginia Beach on the weekdays; we rarely left the house to go around the city. We saw an older man walking his primped poodle, a woman working the corner, and a crazy old man talking to a flock of pigeons.

While I found it entertaining to cruise through the city while listening to an Insane Clown Posse CD (which my parents would've murdered me for doing, had they known about it), Cliff and Aaron didn't seem that enthusiastic about it. Aaron slipped a marijuana cigarette out of his shirt pocket.

"Toss me your lighter," Aaron told Cliff.

Cliff grunted and fished around in his jacket pocket. He removed a red Bic and tossed it to Aaron. "Don't use up all my fluid. I ain't got another lighter yet."

"Calm down, homie. I got you if we gotta stop for another one."

"Yeah, you better," Cliff said, chuckling. "You'll be *walking* your tail back to the house."

Aaron lit the joint, took two hits, and passed it to Cliff. Cliff took a hit and did a French inhale.

"You wanna hit this, little man?" Cliff asked me, holding the weed out for me to take.

"Nah. I'm cool, thanks," I said.

"C'mon. You'll love it," Aaron piped up.

I shook my head firmly. "Nah. I don't want to do drugs. I don't mind if you guys do, though."

The two of them finished off the joint, laughing. They got hungry, then began arguing over where to stop and get a bite to eat. After a heated debate, they settled on Los Tres Amigos, a local, family-owned Mexican restaurant. I love Mexican food. It would hit the spot.

Cliff eased his Eighty-Eight up to the front of the diner and we climbed out. The three of us entered the eatery, only one of us clear-headed. Carla, the hostess, seated us and brought us a basket of corn tortilla chips and very spicy picante sauce. Cliff and Aaron ransacked the basket with such fervor that I could barely get a chip out edgewise.

Our waiter arrived shortly after that. He was a bit on the short side, with slicked-back, jet-black hair and a bristly black mustache. He walked with a slight limp; however, you might not notice it unless you were looking for it. Pretend that everything Cliff and Aaron said was in a bad imitation of a Mexican accent – it was.

"Good evening," the waiter said. "I'm Raul. What can I get you all?"

"Ho-la, senior," Cliff said. "Yo kee-ro three beef tacos and uno burrito."

"With guacamole, sour cream, sir?" Raul asked.

"See. Yo kee-ro those things for me burrito."

"And for you?" the waiter addressed Aaron.

"Uh, I want dos burritos and dos churros. Can I have el guacamole with those?" Aaron inquired.

Raul visibly struggled, trying not to wince. "Um, yes, sir, you can have *el guacamole* on them. For you?" he directed to me.

"Yeah, I'll just have the number five combo with guacamole and extra queso blanco," I said, embarrassed by my companions.

"Would you prefer beef or chicken?" Raul inquired, pen poised to take down my selection.

I considered my options. "Chicken is fine. Wait, wait. Can I have one burrito of each and one taco of each?"

Raul nodded. "Of course. And what can I get you all to drink?"

Cliff and Aaron ordered Cokes. I was in the mood for a root beer, but I went with the flow, ordering a Coke. The waiter nodded and quickly returned with our drinks. I sipped my soda; the other two chugged theirs. *Cotton-mouth*, I guessed.

Not long after that, Raul returned with our entrees. Aaron and Cliff devoured their respective meals with reckless abandon. I ate my own food at a more leisurely pace, savoring the blended flavors of garlic, cilantro, and cumin in my meal. The other two stared longingly at my tasty meal as I finished it off.

Raul brought the check, placing it face-down in the center of the table. Aaron picked it up and collected cash from us to cover our orders. I gave him my last five dollars. Aaron grumbled that I wasn't pitching in enough, Cliff told him to shut up, and that was that.

Aaron paid at the cash register, then we got back into the Oldsmobile and hit the road again. While we were riding past an ice cream truck, Cliff slammed into a pothole. I watched in amusement as one of the hubcaps on my side popped off and rolled down the street behind us.

"Hey, uh, Cliff, uh...you just lost a hubcap, dude," I informed him.

"Huh? The hubcap? I don't care. I ain't tryin' to go back and hunt it down," he answered. Cliff and Aaron both laughed, apparently still high.

"Hah! Okay, if you say so," I replied.

"Roll another one up," Cliff ordered.

Aaron reached into his pocket and withdrew a baggie with some small, sticky buds in it, then proceeded to roll up another joint. He sealed it and was about to light it when Cliff stopped him. "Hang on. I gotta go to the bank first."

Cliff swerved into Bank of America's parking lot, nearly missing the turn. He threw the Eighty-Eight into "park" and opened his door.

"Hang on to this, man," Aaron told me, handing me the unlit joint. It had a distinct, but not unpleasant, scent. I shrugged and held on to it until they emerged from the bank a few minutes later.

"Thanks," Aaron told me. He lit the joint with Cliff's lighter, then puffed on it as Cliff hurriedly pulled out of the bank's parking lot. Cliff got onto the highway and his friend passed him the weed. Cliff inhaled deeply, then glanced at me in the rear-view mirror.

"You want some of this?" he asked, holding up the joint.

I shook my head. "Nah. I don't do drugs."

"Why not?" Aaron interrupted. "Because your mommy said not to?" He snorted derisively.

I purpled. "No! Because drugs are bad for me and I don't want to get messed up. Me and my friends all pledged not to do drugs."

Cliff and Aaron exchanged knowing glances. "You know," Cliff began, "your friends smoke pot, too. They just don't tell you 'cause they think you'll nark on them."

I pondered his words, then frowned. "I doubt it. I *know* Daniel doesn't do drugs. *He* would've told me."

Aaron snorted again, much to my annoyance. "Dude, I saw him smoking behind the high school with Brandy Evans just last week. Don't even *try* to tell me he doesn't use drugs. All the cool kids smoke pot. You *do* want to be cool, don't you?" he pressed.

Yes. Yes, I *desperately* wanted to be cool and fit in with the older crowd. If smoking a little pot would do that, then the hell with it. I'd give it a shot.

"Yeah," I replied. "I *am* a cool kid. Now pass it to me."

Cliff laughed. "You a *big* boy, now," he quipped. He handed it back without even taking his eyes off the road.

"Remember," Aaron chimed in, "if you don't inhale it all the way, it doesn't count!"

I gulped nervously and nodded, wondering what I'd just talked myself into. *Here goes nothing*, I thought, placing the joint between my lips. I closed my eyes, said a silent prayer, and inhaled from the joint. I'd scarcely inhaled, when the hot, dry smoke evaporated all the saliva in my mouth, making me cough. I hacked and wheezed; the other two cracked up.

"Haha, little man! You're one of us, now," Aaron declared, turning around and putting me in a mock head-lock. I coughed again and giggled. I took one more hit, but I didn't get the same coughing spasms that I had before. I passed the cigarette back to the front.

"Wow. That's crazy," I observed. Then the high smacked me like I'd insulted its mother. I felt dizzy, disoriented, as though the car was spinning. My mouth and throat were the Gobi Desert.

I snatched a Mountain Dew and drained it, which helped only slightly. The other major effect that I noticed, looking back on things, is that everything seemed hilarious – no matter how unfunny it actually should have been.

We giggled and cracked jokes for the next half-hour, when Cliff decided to stop for some Doritos and more sodas. I wasn't about to argue. Cliff pulled into a 7-11 and we all went inside, on the hunt for chips and drinks.

Unbeknownst to us, a deputy had just pulled up and entered the store. I didn't even hear the bells over the door jingle as he entered. I just suddenly felt a heavy hand on my shoulder. I whirled around, taken completely by surprise.

"Excuse me, son, but are you under the influence of drugs?" the tall, black-haired officer asked. His right hand rested on his service Glock.

My heart stopped and my stomach plummeted. My mouth fell open, unable to form the syllables to defend the rest of me. Finally, I managed to stammer an unconvincing "n-n-no sir." He eyed me carefully, then told me to follow him outside. Crestfallen, I did so.

He asked me for my ID, which I didn't have, so I had to tell him my name, address, and phone number. The officer conducted a field sobriety test, having me walk a line, touch my nose, and so forth. Of course, I failed.

"Wait here," he told me, cuffing me and placing me in the back of his patrol car.

The patrolman went back inside and pulled Aaron and Cliff out front to test them, as well. They failed, and the policeman frisked them before putting them in the back of his squad car next to me. He pulled me back out and radioed the others in to his dispatch officer.

"Those two are headed to county," the lawman told me, "but since you are still a kid, I'm going to leave your punishment up to your parents."

My eyes went as wide as dinner plates and I shook my head in fear. "No, please, can't you send me to jail? Don't call my parents. Mom will *kill* me!" I pleaded.

"Oh, yes, they get to deal with it," he reaffirmed. "Those two hoodlums will be enough paperwork as it is, and I really don't feel like dealing with the captain over arresting some kid." I paled as he dialed the phone number I'd given him. A tense moment passed as he waited for someone to answer the call.

"Good afternoon, ma'am. This is Officer Reynolds calling, with regard to your son, Edgar...no, no, ma'am, he's not hurt...yes, I'm afraid he's in some trouble. I picked him up here at the 7-11 on Atlantic Avenue for being under the influence of drugs...marijuana, from the smell of it.

"Yes, ma'am, he was accompanied by two adult males who were also under the influence. No, he's not going to jail. You can come pick him up and punish him as you see fit. Yes, he's yours...ten minutes? That'll be fine. I'm sorry to have to trouble you with this, ma'am...yes, you too...goodbye."

Officer Reynolds hung up and raised his eyebrows at me. I wished he would just take me to jail instead of releasing me into the lioness's den.

Those ten minutes were the longest twelve hours of my life. I tried to keep my mind off what Mom had in store for me, but it was impossible. I kept remembering all those medieval torture devices I'd seen at the museum – the rack, the Iron Maiden, the Coffin of Death. All of those seemed tame compared to what Mom was going to do to me when we got home.

Mom pulled up in her Toyota with an expression on her face that terrified me. I'd never, in my entire life, seen her this angry. She was practically purple. I winced, awaiting her wrath.

Mom stepped out and dragged me by my ear to the passenger-side door. I got in without so much as a peep, knowing that my best course of action was complete, unquestioning obedience. Mom walked over to Officer Reynolds and the two began talking. She and the patrolman nodded and gestured. I couldn't make out what they were saying, but Mom's countenance wasn't softening.

Finally, she came back and got in, starting the car. "Mom, I didn't—" I began, but she whirled around and glared at me so fiercely that I believed I might be set ablaze or struck by

lightning at any moment. Medusa could learn a thing or two from Mom. I gulped and silenced myself. Our trip home was tense and wordless from that point on.

When we got home, Mom stalked into the house and pointed to my room, lips pursed. Meekly, I slunk to my room and shut the door. I sat down heavily on the bed, stewing in my own guilt and remorse. I wondered what Dad would say. I hated to let my parents down.

Dad returned home before long. Apparently, he'd dropped Mom off earlier so he could go back out and pick something up for her. He and Mom went straight into their bedroom. That's when the proverbial manure hit the fan. The commotion lasted for several minutes, and I dreaded the moment I'd be in the middle of it.

The argument stopped abruptly, and my heart thundered as I heard Dad's heavy footsteps on the wooden floor approaching my room. Much to my surprise, I heard *him* sigh right before he twisted the doorknob and entered, his countenance a mask of fury and disappointment. He closed the door, paused, then sat down on my bed next to me.

"Your mother told me that you were picked up by the police for using marijuana," he began, then held a hand up to silence my protest. "No. Listen. Just listen to me. You're almost a grown man and soon you'll have to make all your own decisions. The one you made today was a poor one.

"Marijuana is harmful. It causes short-term memory loss, and driving under its influence can get you or someone else killed." Dad swallowed hard. "We could've lost you today, Eddie. Do you have any idea what it would do to us if we had to bury you?"

Dad wiped a tear from the corner of his eye. "I'm...I'm so disappointed in you. I thought we raised you better than that." He paused. "I blame myself. I didn't make you understand just how serious a problem drugs are."

Dad stood, shoulders slumped, defeated. He left without another word. Mom immediately entered and slammed the door, still furious. "You screwed up big-time, buster. You're grounded for a month. No Nintendo 64 until further notice. And don't you even *think* about hanging out with those two again!" With that, she spun on her heels, yanked the door open, and left, slamming the door again behind her on her way out.

I hung my head and began sobbing. I won't lie – the grounding and loss of my video games *sucked*. Upsetting my mother and shaming my father, though, felt far worse than any punishment they could devise. I was ashamed of myself. Dad *had* done everything he could to raise me right.

Why *did* I do it? I wasn't thinking things through when I did it. I suppose I could just chalk it up to Uncle Ted and the abuse he inflicted upon me, but that would just be scapegoating him. I knew what I was doing was wrong. I was weak and caved in to peer pressure, plain and simple. I had nobody to blame but Edgar Brantley.

* * *

When I have the chance to reflect on errors in judgment like this one, I can peel away the layers of duress and uncertainty to find a core of wisdom. I had given in to what others wanted me to do. I'd done it to please them. I didn't want to do drugs anymore. I'm me, and I want to *be* me.

While I was under the influence of marijuana, I wasn't Eddie – I was somebody else, a stranger. Using drugs is like giving away or discarding chunks of your life. Life's too short to give pieces of it away. It was time that I lived my life for myself – and nobody else.

Chapter 7 - Wet, Hot, American Summer (Camp)

Everyone remembers their first love. Have *you* ever fallen in love? I recommend it to everyone. If you haven't yet tasted the sweet nectar of true love, get out there and go for it. Go to bars, concerts, pool halls, New Year's Eve parties. Put yourself out there and find him or her.

Even if the person you find isn't "the one", you'll be better off for having tried, and none the worse for wear. And the prize, the reward for finding that one? Everlasting love and happiness, and never again wanting for anything. Okay, maybe not. Go for it anyway.

* * *

Just before the summer of my seventeenth birthday, I signed up at school for a summer camp for people sixteen to twenty. It sounded like fun, and I'd saved up enough money from allowances and odd jobs around the neighborhood to cover the five-hundred-dollar enrollment fee. In exchange for that money, I'd receive eight weeks of sports, arts and crafts, and other activities at Camp Okeechobee, near Raleigh-Durham. June twenty-fifth couldn't come soon enough.

* * *

That fateful day finally arrived, and my parents and I were on our way to Camp Okeechobee. We'd stopped to get snacks for the three-hour trip, so I was munching on some Funyuns and drinking a cherry Slurpee. We spent most of the journey talking anxiously about the wonderful adventures that awaited me.

Eventually, after much anticipation and discussion, Dad pulled up to the entrance to the rustic camp. (He never would let Mom drive when he was in the car.) A large tree limb, trimmed and sanded, formed an archway over the entry road, which became a dirt road just past that arch. "Camp Okeechobee" had been carved into the branch and painted yellow.

I could already see rows of antiquated wooden cabins, a recreation area, and, farther away, a large lake with bright orange canoes roped to the dock. Huge pine trees with rough, gray-brown bark lined the camp on both sides and on the far side of the lake. A strong pine scent permeated the air, and we smiled as we inhaled it.

Dad idled the car along the dirt path toward the wooden cabin marked "Office", obeying the small wooden sign proclaiming a five-mile-per-hour speed limit. As we approached the office, I saw that there were quite a few camp counselors and that the camp was co-ed. Dad parked the car out front and we walked inside. For a change of pace, I carried my own luggage.

The unpainted old wooden door creaked as it swung inward. The walls of the office were covered with local maps, motivational posters, and a Billy Bass toy. On the worn wooden desk sat a brass nameplate that had "Karl Miles, Director" etched in it.

Behind that desk sat a short, stocky man with a Smokey the Bear-type hat and a metal whistle around his neck. His khaki shorts and uniform shirt could've done with a bit more cloth, but at least he seemed friendly enough.

"Good afternoon! I'm Director Miles," he confirmed, shaking each of our hands in turn. "Checking in, miss?"

Dad laughed and Mom blushed at the flattery. "No," she giggled, "Eddie here is your new charge."

"That's right," Dad added, putting an arm around my shoulders. "Eddie here signed up for the VIP package."

Director Miles chuckled. "Here at Camp Okeechobee, *all* our guests are VIPs. Isn't that right, Janice?"

This question was directed at the slender redhead that had just entered the room behind us. Her green eyes were wide with excitement, and *her* uniform seemed to fit her better than the director's did him. She set the stack of manila folders that she'd been clutching onto the desk.

"Yes, sir. Here at our summer camp, we ensure that every single guest gets what they want out of the experience. Campers can canoe on the lake, play badminton, volleyball, tetherball, croquet, use the tire swings, and so much more. Each day and each night, we have at least a dozen activities to enjoy. Do you like to act?" Janice asked me, smiling.

Evidently, they also served Kool-Aid here at the camp – and Janice had drunk it. "Um, sure? I guess," I offered weakly, wondering when the other Stepford counselors would appear.

"That's great," Janice continued. "Every week we have plays and improv. Anyone can join right in – it's just for fun. You'll have a terrific time." She smiled at me again, then turned back to her boss. "Here are the check-in packages, release forms, and orientation booklets you requested, sir. Will there be anything else?"

Director Miles paused for a moment, then shook his head. "No, thank you. That's all for now. I'll see you at the welcoming party at five-thirty."

"I'll be there," she promised before taking her leave.

The director looked at us once again and sat down. "If you will please sign this liability waiver, we can get Eddie set up and you can be on your way."

He smiled and slid the form to Dad, who accepted the director's pen and signed the paper. Mom followed suit, then returned the form and pen to the director.

"Excellent. You may want to say your goodbyes now, but I promise you that we will take good care of Eddie," Director Miles said.

My parents hugged me and told me that they loved me and would miss me; I promised to have fun and stay out of trouble. They left, and I could clearly hear their "vintage" automobile drive off down the dirt road toward home. I was on my own. For the first time in my life, I was away from home, my family, and everything I knew.

"You can have a look around the camp, if you like," the director offered. "One of our counselors can show you to your cabin, as well, so you can unpack and get situated." The stout man shook my hand heartily and gripped my arm with his free hand. "Enjoy your time here, son, and make sure you let me or any of the counselors know if you need anything."

I gave him my thanks and headed outside. The pungent pine aroma once again assaulted my nostrils. I spotted Janice next to the volleyball court, where a half-dozen campers were playing volleyball in the sandy pit.

"Janice, right?" I asked, jogging up to the redhead.

She turned to me, beaming. "That's right! How can I help you?"

"Can you please show me to my cabin?" I asked, holding up one of my duffel bags.

"Sure. Follow me," she instructed.

I followed Janice to the second row of wooden camper cabins. The campers' cabins were better-maintained than the office was, but time (and weather) had taken their tolls on the exterior. The faded yellow-and-brown paint wasn't quite peeling, but a fresh coat couldn't hurt. The rooms along the cabin were side-by-side, with light brown shutters framing the two windows in each room.

Janice showed me to the fourth room, which was at the end of the row. "This is B-4, where you'll be staying," she explained. Janice pointed to the bunk beds. "Just pick a bed that hasn't

been taken and put your sheets on it. The bathrooms and showers are gender-segregated and located in the main building adjacent to the pavilion. Do you have any questions for me?"

I shook my head. Janice had covered everything well enough for now, and I was tired.

"Okay," Janice said. "It's three-fifteen now. I'll see you at the dining hall at five-thirty!" she chirped as she walked out.

I surveyed my new home for the next few weeks. We had four beds, four dressers that looked to be older than *I* was, and a yellow sink that looked like it was made of marble. A worn oval rug covered the center of the floor, and on the rug sat three wooden chairs around a matching table. Why three, you ask? My guess is that one got broken. The room was lit by long, tubular fluorescent bulbs that cast a yellow tint on everything.

I was exhausted, so I hurriedly unpacked my things. I quickly tossed a set of sheets on my bed, made it, and grabbed my pillow. In a single swift motion, I leaned back on my bed and shoved my pillow under my head. Sleep, sweet sleep, enveloped me without delay.

* * *

I yawned and stretched, then rubbed my eyes lazily. I glanced at my watch. Five-eighteen. I jolted upright. The party would be starting soon, so I leapt out of bed and pulled my shoes on. I noticed that some more bags had found their way into B-4, but I had more pressing matters on my mind to attend to.

I opened the door and jogged to the dining hall, not wanting to be late. I saw throngs of people loitering around the dining area, and pop music echoed throughout the camp. There seemed to be a boom box in the dining hall, and it was pushing out a Britney Spears song.

As I entered the dining hall, I was peppered with greetings from camper and counselor alike. There were campers of every shape, size, and color. Obviously, all the campers were between sixteen and twenty years old, but some appeared to be as young as thirteen and others in their mid-twenties. This diverse group was fascinating.

I grabbed a seat on a bench between a skinny Asian boy and a pale girl with bright red hair and freckles. As though that was the cue, a hush rapidly fell over the assembly. Director Miles was at the front, by the juice machines, holding a microphone in one hand and motioning for quiet with the other. He glanced at Janice, who gave him a thumbs-up, then began addressing the group.

"Welcome, everyone, to Camp Okeechobee! I see some familiar faces, but for those of you who don't know me, I'm Director Karl Miles. This," he said, pointing at a redhead I recognized, "is my assistant, Janice. You can come to either of us or any counselor if you have questions or concerns."

My eyes began to wander until I saw a blond woman, fairly tall, standing on the back wall. Her aura and presence were captivating. Her long, dirty-blond hair, her full lips with the bubble-gum-pink lip gloss, her delicate, womanly curves. She was wearing a tight, pink tank-top, cut-off jean shorts, a pink belt, and pink flip-flops. I couldn't pry my eyes from her.

"...and lunch is at eleven-thirty," the director continued, as I snapped out of my fantasy. "Dinner will start at five-thirty. On another note, be sure to check out the daily activities sheet posted outside each cabin for a list of our official activities for the day. As a reminder, noon until dinner on weekdays, as well as all weekend long, is your free time. During mornings and after dinner, you are all strongly encouraged to partake of the structured activities.

"Rooms have been assigned, but if you'd like to move for any reason, please get with Janice. Okay, enough talk. I wish you all the very best this summer, so make some memories you'll never forget. Here's the cake!"

Cheers erupted from the congregation, shaking the walls as the director turned off the microphone. He stepped aside to make way for several counselors carrying in orange-colored cakes. They looked and smelled scrumptious.

Lines quickly formed that ran outside the cafeteria and around the corner. I spotted my enchanting blonde about a dozen people behind me in line, so I allowed everyone between the two of us to go ahead of me. Finally, she was behind me; I turned around and stuck my hand out.

"Hi! I'm Eddie. What's your name?" I asked.

She ignored the offered hand, giving me a quick hug instead. "Hi there, Eddie! I'm Laurie Sanders. Where I come from, we don't jus' shake hands – we hug. A stranger is jus' a friend I ain't met yet." She giggled.

I couldn't place her country accent, but she certainly wasn't from the east coast. "So, where are you from, Laurie?" I inquired.

"Well, ain't you forward, darlin'?" she laughed. I could drown myself in her intoxicating accent and die a happy (young) man. "I'm from a small town in Nebraska," she explained. "I jus' moved here a few months ago 'cause I wanted to live on the coast. I didn't like it out there, plus there's no jobs out there but waitressin' an' hairdressin'. What about you, Eddie? Where you from?"

I smiled. "I'm from Virginia Beach. It's quite a drive, but I'm already glad I came." I winked at Laurie, who blushed in response.

We continued to talk as the line advanced. By the time we'd reached the cake, I'd learned quite a bit about her: she was twenty, single (never married), had two cats (a Siamese and a calico), worked as a waitress, enjoyed romance novels and comedy movies, and believed in Fate.

Once we got to the cake, we discovered that it was orange three-layer cake with pineapple chunks and whipped cream on top.

"Ooh, my favorite!" Laurie cooed.

I smirked at her. "No, you can't have mine," I teased.

Laurie socked me on the shoulder. "I'll get my own, sugar."

I ended up getting a larger piece of cake than she did, so I offered to trade. Laurie initially declined, but I insisted, so she rolled her eyes, grabbed my plate, and stuck hers in my hand. We found an empty table and sat across from each other.

We continued talking even as we snacked on the cake and drank fruit punch. I was liking Laurie more and more with each passing moment. We hung out, conversing, until nearly nine-thirty; it would soon be "lights out."

"I have to get to bed," I informed her, stifling a yawn.

"Oh, gosh! Look at the time," Laurie cried out in her endearing accent. "I gotta go, too, Eddie, but I'll see ya tomorrow. I promise!" She leaned over and hugged me again. "You sleep well, darlin'."

"You too. See you then," I pledged, then headed for my cabin as the party wound down.

* * *

I didn't see Laurie the next morning – she must've skipped breakfast and chosen different activities than I did. I wasn't entirely surprised, though. There *were* at least four activities slated for any given time slot, and I wouldn't be caught *dead* in the Embroidery class.

At lunch, though, I found my new love and sat at her table. The aroma of baked turkey filled the air – lunch was a turkey sandwich, potato chips, carrots (yum!), and pecan pie. It wasn't a large lunch, but I ate slowly just to have more time with Laurie.

We spent more time conversing than we did nibbling our sandwiches. I crunched my potato chips while she told me about life back in Springview. It seemed that, among other things, Laurie could milk a cow, wrestle a hog, gather up eggs, and shuck bushels of corn without breaking a sweat.

Laurie looked at me intently with her ocean-blue eyes. "Tell me about yourself, about life in Virginia Beach."

I shrugged, unsure what exactly she wanted to know. I told her about Mom, Dad, Daniel, and life in the (not so) big city. When I told her about how Calvin had died of heartworms the previous winter, it saddened her. When I told her about Lenny, though, our moods were considerably more somber.

Laurie slid her hand onto mine and squeezed gently, lovingly, to console me. My heart thundered rapidly as I felt her warmth and the softness of her palm against the back of my hand; her touch was the blessed caress of the highest of angels. No doubt about it – this older woman had me: hook, line, and sinker.

* * *

Over the next two weeks, Laurie and I spent a lot of time together. She was a godsend to me, my own little slice of Heaven right here on Earth. She made me cheerful, dizzy, manic, light-headed, and discombobulated – and I wouldn't have had it any other way.

One day that stands out occurred about a week and a half into the camp. It was a sunny July morning, and we were having a tug-of-war tournament. About thirty campers were competing, with three-on-three rounds. A nine-foot-wide pit filled with fresh mud sat in the center. I'll let you imagine what happened to the losers.

Toward the end of the preliminary round, I was due up. Kenny, Josh, and Darryl were clashing with Chuck, Tiny, and me. Kenny and Darryl were no slouches, but Tiny was a beast. That was fortunate, since Chuck and I wouldn't be able to contribute quite as much in the strength department.

The six of us gripped the rope as Laurie observed us from the edge of the pit. Counselor Kay blew her whistle and we began to pull the line. I grunted and groaned, yet the ribbon at the center of the cable barely flinched.

Slowly, my hands began to slip on the greasy rope. Even with the knots tied in the rope, I couldn't secure my grip. Adjusting my hands served only to make us lose more momentum. My worn sneakers skidded across the hard-packed dirt as we inched closer to our filthy doom.

Suddenly, we found a hidden reserve of strength and determination, and we yanked back on the line like a team of oxen. The ribbon shot back to our side of the pit, then crept closer and closer to the victory line on our side.

As quickly as our momentum had changed, it reverted to the other team. Our combined willpower and noble efforts were no longer enough to claim victory. The ribbon sailed to the other end as we slid forward in the dirt. Sensing our imminent defeat, Tiny released his hold on the rope; Chuck and I flew head-first, face-down into the mud, sliding nearly all the way to the far edge of the pit as the cable was torn from our grasp.

Most of the other campers were cheering or laughing at the spectacle before them. I slowly made my way to my feet, wiping mud off my clothes and out of my eyes – *that* was an exercise in futility. I glanced over at my sweetheart to see her laughing hysterically, her dainty hand covering her mouth. I walked over to her.

"So, this is funny, huh?" I calmly asked Laurie. "You find this amusing?"

"Yeah, I do, sugar," she finally uttered, once she was able to stifle her laughter for more than a second. "Seein' you take a dive into that mud reminds me of long ago on my daddy's farm. It brings back memories," she giggled.

I pondered her words for a moment, mud sliding down my leg. "Well, then. *This* should be the perfect memory aid," I said, grinning devilishly.

"Huh? What are you talki—" she began.

I wrapped my arms around Laurie and pulled her tightly against me, smearing my muddy clothes against her formerly pristine ones. Laurie shrieked. I laid my palms flat against her back, ensuring that she was filthy all over. Laurie tried to wriggle away; however, she succeeded only in causing both of us to topple over into the pit.

The crowd laughed and hooted as we wrestled in the muck. Laurie gave the term "dirty blonde" a whole new meaning as streaks of mud caked in her hair. All semblance of order collapsed, and everyone began scooping and throwing mud like we were at trials for the Summer Olympics.

* * *

Laurie and I continued seeing each other for the rest of our stay. Of all the games and activities I took part in, the ones I shared with her meant the most. In fact, the single most memorable night I had with Laurie happened less than two weeks before we were slated to return home.

* * *

It was nearly twelve o'clock on a clear Friday night, when I awoke with a start. My roommates were asleep, so I slipped my tennis shoes on and grabbed the basket of goodies from under my bunk. Among other things, the basket held a bottle of apple cider, some sandwiches, a few oranges, and an entire cherry pie. I'd managed to "procure" these things from the kitchen earlier in the day. Let's just say I had an inside connection and leave it at that.

With stealth that would've made a ninja proud, I slipped outside, closing the door silently behind me. I snuck over to D-3, the moon aiding me on my quest, and tapped the window softly with my index finger.

Laurie was a light sleeper, but it still took several moments to rouse her from her slumber without alerting her cabin mates. She crept to the window and I motioned for her to come outside. Laurie cocked an eyebrow at me, popped her shoes on, and came out, shivering in her light blue pajamas.

"Let's go to the lake," I blurted out, holding up the picnic basket I'd been carrying.

"What?! It's the middle of the night!" Laurie exclaimed.

"I know." I motioned toward the basket. "Please?"

Laurie scrunched her nose as she considered my invitation. "Okay, but let me put some real clothes on, first."

"Fine. Hurry up!" I grinned.

Laurie dashed inside, emerging a moment later in faded blue jeans and a white halter top. She leaned over and gave me a peck on the cheek, then we strolled to the lake, hand-in-hand.

Once we arrived at the lake, we approached its edge. The scent of the pine trees was far more potent out here than by the cabins, but floral aromas blunted the attack on our nostrils. I removed the blanket from the basket and laid it out for us to sit on. I motioned for Laurie to have a seat. Once she had done so, I set the basket down and followed suit.

"So, you wanted to kidnap me for a moonlit picnic?" Laurie asked, peering into my soul with her sparkling sapphire orbs.

"Yes, I did, sweetie. I wanted to have a nice, romantic picnic with you, without the hustle and bustle of everyone else around us. Plus," I added, "I'm not sure what the counselors and other staff would have to say about this."

Laurie smiled and took my hand. Her touch was invigorating, heavenly. "That's so sweet of you, Eddie. I really like you, and I think this is a great idea." Her bubbly words and smile made my heart skip a few beats. She was truly an angel sent by God, with the mission of enrapturing and enchanting me. Mission accomplished.

I smiled back. There were so many things I wanted to tell her and just as many doubts as to which ones to say. I elected to keep it simple for now. "So, are you ready to eat?"

Laurie nodded, caressing my hand sensually. Nervously, I poured two glasses of sparkling cider and pulled out a pair of sandwiches. We feasted on the refreshments without hesitation. I took an orange out of the basket and peeled it as Laurie gazed upon me with adoration. The two of us took turns feeding each other orange wedges as we stared with wonder at the twinkling stars and the silver-dollar moon.

Laurie peeled an orange herself, and the scent of the oranges blended with the wafting aromas of water lilies and Laurie's sweet vanilla-and-brown sugar perfume. I took it all in deeply and experienced it throughout my body. Nothing in my life had ever felt so good, so right.

I refilled our glasses. "A toast," I proclaimed, raising my glass in the summer moonbeam, "to serendipity, that wonderful, inexplicable, irresistible force that brings people together who might otherwise never have met."

"To serendipity," Laurie repeated, and we clinked glasses and sipped cider. I served the cherry pie and we slowly consumed our respective slices, occasionally feeding one another. Laurie was stunning, especially in the silky moonlight. I couldn't get over her.

Without a word, my sweet Laurie leaned over and kissed me softly, passionately on the lips. Her tongue found mine and I could taste her. She tasted like apple and cherry mingling with her own unique flavor – it was sweet, tart, and a tad salty, and I was an addict.

I ran my fingers through her golden-brown tresses with my left hand as my right hand gripped her back and held her against me. Laurie wrapped her arms around me under my shirt, holding me tightly.

I pulled away from her mouth, over her protests, to nibble on her earlobe and kiss her vulnerable neck. She moaned and squeezed my back even more firmly, arching her own. I kissed her pink lips once more, and we rolled over onto the blanket, panting with lust, love, and youthful energy.

* * *

We barely made it back to our respective cabins before five in the morning. No one caught us in the act, but I think some suspected that we were seeing each other. We were both exhausted that day, and, much to Laurie's chagrin, I'd marked her neck as my territory.

That was the first time we made love, but it would be far from the last. We did our best to keep it secret, but nothing secret stays that way for long.

* * *

It was difficult to say goodbye to everyone when the time came to part ways. Laurie and I exchanged phone numbers and swore we'd stay in touch, naively believing that we could make a long-distance relationship work. I didn't enjoy bidding farewell to Chuck, Tiny, Kenny, or the fun we had together, either, but goodbyes are just one stage in the cycle of our lives.

As it turns out, Laurie and I *did* end up staying in touch. In fact, we got married a few years later, in a small ceremony in her backyard. We adored each other and took great pleasure in

trying to get Laurie pregnant. A year after our wedding, my gorgeous wife was carrying my child – but I'm getting ahead of myself. I'll get back to Laurie soon enough, if we have time.

If you'd told me on the day that my parents dropped me off at summer camp that I'd meet the love of my life there, I'd have stared at you like you were a sideshow attraction. That's just another thing I love about new adventures – no matter what your plans are, you never can tell what God has in store for you.

Chapter 8 - Breaking Dawn

I had a wonderful, memorable time at Camp Okeechobee. I'd have clung to and cherished those days even more than I did, if only I had foreseen the darker days to come. Life's no picnic, but if it was, the upcoming days would be the storm clouds that soak you and cut short your festivities.

* * *

I was only nineteen, but my life was already beginning to spiral out of control. Daniel was a true friend who stood by my side, no matter what. I'd wanted to move out of my parents' house to have some freedom and breathing room; Daniel allowed me to move into his two-bedroom apartment, rent-free, so I could get on my feet while being free from direct supervision.

Being broke sucked. Yeah, I got food stamps, but that was all. I had to bum a ride from Daniel when I wanted to go grocery shopping. When I wanted to watch cable, I had to watch whatever was on his twenty-four-inch television.

Don't get me wrong – I was truly grateful for everything he did for me. I just wanted something more. Welcome to my fourth sin.

* * *

Daniel and I were riding home in his Honda Accord after another round of me turning in job applications. There weren't a lot of places hiring, and it was discouraging. Since Daniel worked the graveyard shift at a local factory, he didn't mind chauffeuring me around town during the day – as long as it wasn't during his sleep time. I couldn't see myself working at the factory, though – the work was way too hard.

I stared out the window as homes and businesses passed by in a blur. Though we stayed in a clean, fairly nice apartment, there were a number of much more upscale neighborhoods within a few miles of us. Many of those homes sold for a quarter-million or more. I wanted to live in a luxurious home like one of those, but I doubted that I'd ever be rich like that. Some people were just destined to be poor.

* * *

It was two weeks later, while watching another "I Love Lucy" rerun on Daniel's television, that I finally decided to do it. I'd been drawing up some plans, but now I'd follow through with them, at last. It was show time.

I grabbed my black duffel bag and scrolled down my checklist, cramming tools and accessories into my kit. Once I'd done the inventory, I quietly tucked my bag into the Accord's trunk while Daniel happily snored away, dreaming of sugar-plum fairies or whatever he dreamt of while asleep. I seriously doubted that he would approve of my scheme.

My plan required the use of a car. I'd have to use Daniel's car in the early morning while he was at work. I couldn't run the risk that Daniel might wake up and notice that his car was gone. Time to don my chauffeur's cap.

* * *

Caffeine didn't get Daniel wired the way it does most people, but in larger amounts, it *did* give him a mammoth headache. I kept this fresh in my mind as Daniel shambled out of his bedroom, yawning and scratching himself. He stumbled into the bathroom, shutting and latching the door behind him. I heard the rush of water as he turned on the faucet and began splashing his face.

I slipped into the kitchen and opened the refrigerator. Grabbing a glass from the cabinet, I poured Daniel a large cup of orange juice. I took eight gel-cap energy pills out of my pocket and emptied their contents into the juice, guiltily stirring the caffeine cocktail with a spoon.

A few minutes later, Daniel entered the kitchen. I'd already poured myself a glass of orange juice (sans the special ingredient).

"Here you go, man," I said, handing him the drugged juice and sipping my own. I felt horrible – like I was an evil person – but I didn't see any other way to put my plan into action. I loathed myself sometimes.

"Thanks," Daniel mumbled, gulping nearly half of the orange juice in three swallows. Now, I waited for the migraine to set in.

Daniel fixed himself breakfast and got ready for work while I sat at the dining room table, praying the caffeine would take effect, and praying that it wouldn't. Daniel shoved burnt bacon and chewy grits into his mouth and drank a second glass of orange juice. That's when it hit him like a sledgehammer.

"Ow! Ugh, Eddie. I just got a killer headache."

"Really?" I asked, feigning surprise. "Are you going to call in sick?"

"No. You know I can't miss work. I'm already on probation for the days I've missed over the last nine months. If I don't go, I'll get fired," Daniel grumbled.

I pretended to think for a moment before putting a hand on his shoulder. "Well, how about I give you some Advil and drive you to work?" I offered.

"Nuh-uh. No way, Jose," Daniel told me, swallowing the round, red pills from my outstretched hand. "Dude, you don't even have a license!"

"C'mon," I protested. "I barely flunked the driving test. It's not *my* fault Grandma Moses turned right in front of me."

"Turned in front–? Turned in front of you?" my friend asked in disbelief. "SHE HAD THE GREEN LIGHT!"

I shrugged. "To-may-to, to-mah-to. One little mistake and the geezer fails me. It could've happened to anyone."

Daniel gaped at me, then shook his head. "You are absolutely incorrigible. Shoot. I'm gonna be late if we don't leave right now. Let's go. I guess you *have* to drive. If you get in an accident, though, all your crap is gonna be out on the curb before you can say 'driving without a license'."

I nodded. "Promise. It's eleven at night, anyway. Who else is going to be on the road at this time of night?"

Daniel grimaced. "Whatever. I just know I'm gonna regret this. Let's go before I lose my nerve."

I smiled to myself. *I definitely won't lose my nerve*, I thought. *It's time that I moved up in the world, if only a little.*

* * *

It was just after five the following morning, and the sun was still asleep on the other side of the planet. I'd spent the last few hours on pins and needles, waiting for the perfect time to go shopping.

I went out to the car, checked the trunk to make sure my bag was still there, and hopped into the Accord. I eased out of the driveway and headed for the upscale neighborhoods. I was jumpy. There were more than just butterflies in my stomach.

Once I got to Shelby Place, the first of the nicer areas, I carefully cased the block, looking for any homes whose occupants had already left for work or vacation. Surely *someone* in this Richie Rich area had an early start time. I rolled down street after street without luck.

Ten minutes later, I got my break. The house only two down the street from me had what looked like a Jaguar with the brake and interior lights on, sitting in the driveway. It was still a bit dark outside. It seemed like he was about to leave, so I turned the car off and ducked down as he pulled out. I caught a glimpse of him as he headed out – he was in his fifties, with dark hair and a smug grin. *Yeah, yeah, we know you are a rich bastard.*

I pulled into his driveway, hopped out, and rang the doorbell. After four rings without so much as a peep from inside, I was convinced that the house was empty. I donned a balaclava that matched the rest of my all-black outfit. Popping the trunk, I unzipped my bag and equipped myself with the tools for the job, then walked around the house. You could say I was about to gain a level in Thievery.

When I got back around to the front of the house, I stared it at. It was two stories tall, with dozens of windows at various angles. The walls had a stucco appearance, white in color, with no shutters for any of the windows. The roof was orange, giving the house a decidedly Mexican feel. *If I ever get rich, this is the kind of house I'll live in.*

I snapped out of it – I had a job to do. I hustled around to the back of the expansive house, wrapped a rag tightly around my gloved right fist, and smashed the patio door's glass pane near the doorknob. Tossing the rag on the grass, I unlocked the door from the inside. Stepping in, I headed straight for the stairs. Bedrooms were usually upstairs.

A minute later, I entered what appeared to be the master bedroom, and I still didn't hear an alarm – a good sign. Even if there was a silent alarm, I'd have about five minutes to snatch what I could.

Although the bedroom looked nice, it wasn't lavishly furnished. He didn't even have a jewelry box or chest sitting in view. It seemed like no women lived there, meaning there were probably no rings and fewer valuables.

I plowed through the dresser drawers first, coming up empty. Next, I moved on to the closet. I shoved clothes aside, looking for anything stashed behind them. Nothing. I checked the shelf above the clothing rack and, after emptying the contents of the shoeboxes onto the bed, found a nice, low-end Rolex with a polished bezel and mother-of-pearl dial. I shoved it into my pocket and continued my investigation.

Time was running out, so I scrambled to the study I'd passed on my way to the bedroom. It looked nicer, with many impressive tomes on the lacquered wooden shelves, a hardwood writing desk, and a plush blue recliner in the corner. It was a crying shame that I didn't know of a safe way to sell the books. They looked *expensive*.

I checked under the recliner's cushion and behind the books on the shelves. Nothing materialized, so I rapidly riffled through the books, hoping money would fall out from between the pages. I searched the desk drawer; nothing of value. Angrily, I ripped it out and smashed it

against the wall, scattering pens and stationery all over the floor. Lo and behold, a small white envelope was taped to the bottom of the destroyed drawer.

I peeled the envelope off and ripped the edge open. Removing and fanning out the contents, ten Benjamin Franklins stared stoically back at me. Giddily, I stuffed the cash into my pocket. I wanted to stay longer, but I *had* to get out of there. You can only press your luck for so long at one time.

I sprinted downstairs and dashed out the back of my unwitting benefactor's abode. Sirens wailed in the distance as I hopped into the Honda, ripped my balaclava and gloves off, and turned the engine over. Easing out of the driveway, I glanced around in the dawn's early light. Not seeing any police, I pulled onto the road to head home.

Before I'd even left that street, a police car whipped onto it and raced toward me, lights shimmering and siren blaring. Though he sped past me, time stopped as we looked at each other. He glared at me, his bushy brown mustache twitching. His beady eyes sized me up, making me paranoid.

Finally, he turned back toward the road. Thank God I hadn't been speeding or acting suspiciously. I got off that road as soon as I was able, making it home without further incident. Along the way, I saw more police cruisers responding to the call, but all were in the distance. Though no other cruisers passed me, I trembled each time I saw one in my mirrors.

As soon as I got home, I ran excitedly into the apartment. I stuck the thousand bucks in my wallet and slid the Rolex around my wrist. It looked good on me. Well, of *course* it looked good – it was a freaking *Rolex*.

Time crawled as I anxiously awaited the end of Daniel's shift. As soon as it was time, I headed out to pick him up from work. When I arrived, he seemed to be in much better spirits and insisted on driving home. I wasn't in any condition to argue. As soon as we got home, I lay in bed and fell asleep.

* * *

I awoke to the sound of a fist pounding on my bedroom door. I rolled over, a yawn escaping. "Yeah? Whad is id?" I mumbled.

"Dude, the cops are here, and they wanna talk to you," Daniel's voice quavered through the door.

My heart stopped. I could've heard a moth sneeze in the silence that followed. I stood, shakily, and flipped the lights on. "Hang on. I'm not dressed," I called out.

I threw on a long-sleeved, white button-down shirt with blue vertical stripes, a pair of khaki slacks, and white socks and Adidas. I tried to smooth my hair, to no avail. Sighing, I put on a surprised look and opened the door.

In the living room stood two police officers, eyeing me with suspicion. I recognized Mustache, but the other officer was unfamiliar to me. Mustache narrowed his eyes at me before extending his hand.

"Officer Tomlinson. This is Officer Yardley," he said, by way of introduction. I shook each of their hands in turn, and Officer Tomlinson continued. "We're investigating an incident across town that you may have been a witness to. Can you come down to the precinct with us to give a statement?"

I briefly considered protesting, but I wanted to save face in front of Daniel, so I elected to go along quietly. I got into the back of their patrol car and rode along with them to the station. Just as I'd suspected, when we arrived, I was led to an interrogation room – not a witness interview room.

I sat in the metal chair for half an hour, nervously awaiting my fate. Right as I was getting completely tired of staring at the gray walls, metal table, the other chair, and the two-way mirror, a man in nicer clothes than my own entered. The newcomer carried a manila file folder bulging with papers under one arm and a large Styrofoam coffee cup in his other hand. He tossed the folder onto the table, took the chair across from me, and sipped his coffee with a cavalier air about him.

"I'm Detective Sheridan," he grunted. The overweight, balding man looked irritated, and he flexed his hands to reinforce that image. "Don't jerk me around, kid, and I won't make your life miserable. Give me a hard time and I'll throw your butt into a cell with Jamal and Bubba. They'd *love* a pretty, young thing like you. We clear?" he growled. I was terrified at the thought and flashed back to Uncle Ted, but I did my best to conceal my horror. I shrugged and uttered a non-committal grunt.

The veteran started by feeling me out – asking about my employment, daily routine, hobbies, and such. I gave him the most vague and evasive answers I could. Before long, however, I grew tired of that little dance.

"Look, you didn't bring me down here to pick out a birthday gift for me or interview me for an article in Time magazine. What's this all about?" I asked, bluntly.

Detective Sheridan shifted in his chair. "Well, well, well. Eager to get right to it, are we? Fine. There was a burglary over at Shelby Place today. Where were you at about five-fifteen this morning?"

"I was at home, asleep," I countered.

"Can anyone verify this?" the detective asked sarcastically.

"No," I stated. "My friend was at work."

"Well," Detective Sheridan chortled, "how convenient. Mr. Steven Cook's alarm company, ADT, reported a break-in at his home this morning. A silent alarm was triggered, and officers were dispatched to investigate. He was called at work, and rushed home to find that five thousand dollars, a Rolex, and two gold rings had been stolen. He also reported that his study had been vandalized. Now, you wouldn't happen to know anything about that, would you?" The detective sneered at me.

Bull, I thought. *Either this cop is trying to trick me into tipping my hand, or that guy is ripping off his insurance company.* I shook my head. "I don't know anything about that, *officer.*" I knew that comment would be taken as an insult – just as I'd intended.

"*Detective,*" he stressed, a purple vein bulging in his thick neck. "Listen, kid. Daniel's blue Honda Accord was spotted leaving the scene of the crime with *you* behind the wheel. Make it easy on yourself. Confess, plead guilty, and I'll make sure you get probation and community service."

I shook my head again. "But I don't know anything. I can't plead guilty to something I didn't *do,*" I said in the most patronizing voice I could muster.

The portly man reddened. "If you wanna play games, we can play games. I got two eyewitnesses that put you at the scene during the robbery. They saw you leaving through the back door and getting into a blue Honda Accord. If you wanna play hardball, we can get you three to five on burglary and home invasion.

"I'm talkin' hard time in state, not Club Fed. You'll spend your days washing your husband's boxers and fixing his dinner, hoping you don't get stabbed for overcooking the noodles. Whaddaya say *now*, tough guy?"

He flipped through the file folder, pretending to study his papers, while I put on an act of my own, pretending to consider his offer. I tapped the table, furrowed my brow, and rubbed my chin, appearing to be lost in thought. Finally, I put an end to the show and called his bluff.

"Okay," I challenged, "let me see these eyewitnesses, then."

He became rabid. "You wanna see 'em?! Yeah? You can meet them, get their autographs at the trial! Last chance for a deal, kid."

I looked the fat man straight in the eye. "Aren't you short a man for the good-cop, bad-cop routine? Like, seriously, you need a new routine. This one's stale."

Detective Sheridan slammed the folder shut and smacked the steel table with a meaty fist, nearly spilling his coffee; the metallic impact rang throughout the small, bare room with deafening effect. "Don't screw with me, boy! I'll personally testify at your sentencing!"

I glanced around the dismal room, then settled my gaze back on my adversary. "So, am I under arrest?" I asked, innocently.

"I said don't screw with me. Watch your mouth, boy," he growled.

"Am I under arrest?" I repeated.

He ran a hand through the little hair he had left. He sighed and stood. "No. No, you aren't. *Yet*. But I'm watching you, son," he threatened.

"So, I'm free to go?"

"Yeah, you are," he said reluctantly, scribbling in a small logbook he had removed from his shirt pocket. "I have to log it in that you are being released. What time is it?" he asked, glancing up with a defeated look.

My hand instinctively started for my sleeve, but I recognized his trick and stopped myself in the nick of time. "Oh, sorry. I don't have a watch," I shrugged.

"Get the hell out of here!" he screamed.

* * *

The desk sergeant let me use the phone at the front desk to call Daniel for a ride. Daniel rushed down there to pick me up. After we got into his car, Daniel asked me to explain what had happened. I told him all about the detective, the burglary, and the questioning – leaving out my first-hand knowledge of the incident, of course.

Daniel was skeptical. "So, it was all a mix-up?"

I shrugged. "Yep. They thought I was someone else."

We rode the rest of the way home in silence.

* * *

He never came right out and said it, but I think Daniel suspected that I'd somehow had a hand in the burglary. I felt horrible about lying to and drugging my best friend, even in such an innocuous capacity.

I did gain some wisdom that day, even though I didn't know it at the time. I realize I committed two major sins here, but they both furthered the same scheme, so I count them together. Consider it a bonus.

I was wrong to drug and manipulate my friend like that. Even worse, though, was the burglary itself. Taking from someone else – stealing, depriving them of their rightful property – is not the solution to getting out of poverty. Learn a trade, go to college, hell, flip burgers if you must. Increase your wisdom and understanding, then work hard to put it to good use. Money comes and goes, but a good education lasts a lifetime.

Chapter 9 - Twenty-One

Two of the things that children and young adults most look forward to in life are getting older and the privileges commensurate with advancing age. Of those privileges, the two most sought after are drinking and driving (ideally, not at the same time, though that's all too often the case, sadly). We've already discussed my driving, so let's talk about the other one.

* * *

I'd been anticipating my twenty-first birthday for a long time. Daniel had been promoted to line manager at his factory job six months prior, and with his new and improved salary had pledged to hook it up for my twenty-first. He'd celebrated his own milestone birthday not long before this, but since it was at a bar, I had been unable to attend. Mine was going to be bigger and better, anyway.

My buddy had planned a Vegas getaway to celebrate. I wasn't privy to the details, but he did inform me that he had a couple of things up his sleeve. I had to take him at his word. He knew what I liked, and he *was* sponsoring it, after all.

* * *

It was the eve of that magical birthday, and Daniel was preparing to drive us to Norfolk International Airport to catch our flight to Las Vegas. We'd arrive in Vegas at about ten at night, local time.

"You ready yet?" I called out.

Daniel's head popped out from around the corner. "Yeah. Chill out. We won't be late. Did you shower yet?"

I rolled my eyes and sighed dramatically. "Yes, Mother. I washed behind my ears, too." A hand appeared from around that same corner, flipping me the bird. "Nice," I remarked sarcastically.

Minutes later, we were out the door, and shortly after that, we were on I-95, headed south to Norfolk. During the ride, my mind wandered, envisioning the adventures that would be in store for us in Sin City. I'd tried many times to trick him into letting some details slip, all to no avail.

"C'mon, Danny. Tell me at least something about the trip!" I pleaded.

"It's in Las Vegas," he remarked unhelpfully. Daniel made a motion of zipping his mouth shut, locking it, and throwing away the key. "No way. I ain't tellin' you. You'll just have to see for yourself when we get there."

I grumbled in mock annoyance as my mind wandered. Casinos, strip clubs, paintball, shooting ranges, and more. Las Vegas was a Rubik's Cube of possibilities.

We stopped at a 7-11 to grab sodas and beef jerky. The owner was a stoic Middle Eastern man with a bushy black beard and beady eyes that watched us carefully. I'm not sure how many times he'd been robbed, but he was paranoid enough to have a bulletproof glass shield above him that would drop at the press of a button.

Finally, we made it to the airport. Norfolk International was large, with a multi-story parking garage where you could leave your car while you travelled out of town. They offered short-term and long-term parking, each with its own fee schedule. Trams zipped between terminals, lights blinking. The runways were all lit up. Not long from then, we would be taxiing down one of them.

Daniel parked in the long-term parking section, after taking a time card for proof of the duration of our trip. We got out and, after double-checking his door locks, hustled into the main

terminal with our baggage. The two of us checked in early and cleared security, eager to board our flight.

Daniel and I strolled to our gate, stopping at a Backyard Burgers on the way to grab some jalapeno-and-cheese Black Angus chili and sodas. Once we'd stuffed ourselves with the delicious snack, we made our way to our departure gate. Our flight boarded promptly after our arrival at the gate.

We took our seats in coach and got comfortable. I received a small pillow and blanket from the stewardess (they were still free back then!) and prepared to catch forty winks on our flight. Well, twenty-five, at least.

The flight was smooth and quick, since I spent most of it asleep. We arrived at McCarran International Airport and deplaned shortly thereafter. As I surveyed the interior of the airport, I could hardly believe what I saw. Endless rows of slot machines filled the airport! It was unlike anything I'd ever seen.

I made a beeline for the nearest slot bank, pulling a ten out of my pocket. Right as I was about to slide it into a Five Times Pay machine, a hand grabbed my wrist.

"Not yet," Daniel cautioned. "It's not worth getting a ticket right before you can legally gamble."

I sighed, reluctantly returning Mr. Hamilton to the darkness of my pocket. We left the terminal before I could succumb to greed. Daniel and I hopped into a cab at the "taxi stand", though it was more like a long *line* of taxis with no "stand" in sight.

"Take us to the Emerald Suites south of the Strip," Daniel commanded. The cab's engine roared to life and we headed to our hotel. I pressed my face to the glass, gawking at all the lights and shows. We passed the Circus Circus, Treasure Island, Tropicana, Luxor, and more. It was a lot to take in all at once.

Before long, we arrived at the Emerald Suites. It was *just* south of the Strip and it looked extravagant. It was clean and sharp, and it looked pricey.

"That's thirty-one twenty-five," our cabbie said, interrupting our thoughts. Daniel gave the driver thirty-five dollars and told him to keep the change. The cabbie didn't seem satisfied with the tip. That irritated me. He should've been grateful for whatever he got.

We headed into the office. It was nicely furnished, with plants throughout the room and paintings hung on the walls. I hoped our rooms were as nicely decorated as the office was. Daniel and I checked in and got our room keycards.

Daniel led the way to our suite, walking up the concrete-and-metal outdoor staircase and admiring the view of the Strip along the way. Once we arrived at our suite, I unlocked the door. We stepped inside.

I flipped the lights on; the suite was spacious and tastefully furnished. In the living area was a small leather couch opposite a thirty-two-inch television. The kitchen had new stainless-steel appliances, a microwave, a dining table, and four chairs around it. The bedroom had two nice queen-sized beds and a pair of matching mahogany dressers; the bathroom had a large shower area and luxurious toilet and sink.

We took our luggage into the bedroom, then returned to the living room and plopped down on the couch. Daniel's lips were still sealed. We watched the news until eleven-forty, when Daniel turned to me.

"Okay, Eddie, big dog. Let's go for a walk." We stepped outside, Daniel pulling the door shut behind us.

There was a slight chill in the breezy night air, something I didn't expect in the desert. We headed to the Strip on foot, lights flashing all around us and sidewalks bustling with activity. A younger black man was foisting flyers onto anyone that would accept them. I grabbed one and scanned it, seeing a dozen full-color photos of "escorts" we could call up to hang out with. I folded the sheet neatly and slipped it discreetly into my back pocket, just in case.

Many people were talking around openly holding and drinking alcoholic beverages. Across the street, a performer was juggling six flaming bowling pins. Las Vegas wasn't Virginia Beach.

Daniel led me inside the Tropicana, an historic casino with taste and elegance. It wasn't new, but I liked its charm and the history that had been made inside this very casino.

We approached a low-limit blackjack table, and Daniel handed me a wad of bills.

"Here, Eddie. This is some cash to get you started. We are staying tomorrow night, too, so *try* not to spend it all tonight," he chuckled.

In disbelief, I thumbed through the currency, counting two grand in hundred-dollar bills. Two grand! I nearly had a heart attack.

I tried to give the money back. "T-two thousand dollars? Are you *insane*? You worked your butt off to earn this money. I can't accept this!"

Daniel pulled his hands back, refusing to accept the stack of bills. "Yeah, you can. You're a good friend and a good guy. I want your twenty-first to be a total blast. Now let's play some cards."

Knowing I couldn't win the argument, I let it go. The pit boss asked us for identification, so we handed it over. He studied our IDs for a moment, checking our dates of birth. Satisfied, he returned our identification.

"Happy birthday," the boss smiled at me. "It must feel great to finally be twenty-one. Good luck to both of you."

We thanked him and sat down at the card table next to an elderly Chinese lady with piles of chips in front of her. According to a small red sign, the table had a five-dollar minimum bet and a five-thousand-dollar maximum bet.

Daniel put one hundred dollars on the table. Our Hispanic dealer, Ramón, took the bill and placed it on the table to his left. He pulled a stack of red five-dollar chips out of his rack and placed it to his right, calling out "Changing one hundred!" before sliding the stack to Daniel. Ramón repeated the process with my own hundred, and we were ready to begin.

We fooled around at the blackjack table for a little while before moving to the craps table. I'd lost forty bucks, but Daniel had hit a hot streak to win over a hundred.

The craps game didn't have a lot of action. Only three players were at the table as we walked up, and there were few bets on the green felt layout. I didn't want to bet on strangers, anyway. I wanted to live or die by my own hand.

Daniel was to my right, so he got to "shoot", or roll, the dice before I did. Since he was bankrolling me, I didn't hesitate to bet on him. I put ten dollars on the Pass Line, betting with him, and he tossed the red cubes. Seven doubled my money, so I let it ride. Daniel shot the dice again, getting nine as his point. No sooner had I put another twenty behind my bet than Daniel sevened out, costing me forty dollars.

"Ugh. You're killing me here," I groaned as the dealers emptied the table of bets.

Next, the stickman slid the five cherry-red dice to me. I put ten down to bet on myself, selected two of the dice, and tossed them to the opposite end of the table. Three – craps. I put another ten down to replace my losing bet, then tossed the cubes once more. Eleven was a winner. I stacked my winnings onto my bet.

Next, I threw a ten on the dice, making it my point. Feeling bold, I tossed some chips on the table. "Give me one-oh-eight across." I'd picked that up from one of those television documentaries on casino gambling. Basically, I was betting on four, five, six, eight, and nine to go along with my ten. The dealer obeyed, and I put twenty dollars behind my Pass Line wager.

As soon as I rolled the dice again, I got a six. I told the dealer to "press" it – increase the bet – by one unit, six dollars in this case. I kept hitting numbers and pressing my bets, and Daniel eventually began betting on me. Twenty minutes later, I finally rolled a seven at the wrong time and lost. All told, though, I was up eight hundred dollars. Daniel was even further ahead.

We stuck around for a while, and I ordered a Skyy Blue from the waitress. Daniel followed suit while we messed around with the dice.

A few minutes later, we started trying other games. We played slot machines, video poker, and roulette. Roulette sucks. I'm just putting that out there. I lost nearly every spin I played, and it didn't even hold my interest. It was just too slow for my taste.

"Okay," Daniel said, "it's two in the morning. Normally, I'd say we keep playing, but this was just a warm-up anyway. Let's get back and get some rest. You'll need it." I nodded, and we grabbed our chips and cashed out.

* * *

I awoke sleepily to someone poking me in the ribs. "Ow. Cut it out, Daniel," I winced. I opened my eyes and saw my friend leaning over me, grinning.

"Rise and shine, Sleeping Beauty," he joked.

I yawned. "What time is it?"

"Almost one. You were out like a light. Get up and get ready."

Sluggishly, I pulled myself out of bed, brushed my teeth, showered, and put on some nice clothes. I put on a gray-striped, black button-down shirt (with the top button left undone), black slacks, a thin black belt, and black socks and dress shoes. I left my shirt untucked and applied some fancy body spray. I hoped it would do what the advertisements claimed.

"You ready yet?" Daniel asked. "I know *women* who would've been ready by now."

I mock-scowled in the mirror for Daniel's benefit, then fixed my collar. Buttoning my cuffs, I turned to face my best friend. "Yep. Let's blow this popsicle stand."

We hurried outside, flagged down a taxi, and hopped in. Daniel had the driver recommend a nearby eatery with decent, cheap steaks, and the Lebanese cabbie dropped us off at a local diner. Daniel paid the fare and we went inside.

It was a small restaurant and not much to look at, but it smelled terrific, and that was far more important. Even in the front, the sizzle of meat on the grill reached our ears. The scents of grilled steaks, garlic mashed potatoes, and cornbread mingled, producing a unique, tantalizing aroma that made our mouths water. Other patrons ate at the small wooden tables, and the clatter of silverware on ceramic dishes resounded throughout the diner.

Famished as I was, I couldn't eat until we'd ordered. I hate waiting around in restaurants, smelling all the wonderful food, when I am hungry. It's torture.

Daniel put a hand on my shoulder. "Eat up, Eddie. You'll want a full stomach for all the drinking you'll be doing tonight." We sat and ordered some steaks, a salad, and a pile of mashed potatoes.

Forty-five minutes – and twenty dollars – later, Daniel and I were walking along the Strip, marveling at the sights we beheld. "Okay. Your first treat is coming up soon," Daniel promised. "Let's get drinks." I was going to point out that two thousand dollars certainly qualifies as a treat, but I thought better of it.

Daniel ran into the Luxor on our left, its blue beam shining upward into the midnight-black sky like a beacon, emerging moments later with a Skyy Blue in each hand. "Drink up," Daniel said, so I took the bottle he offered and complied.

We wandered north along the Strip for a short while, as Daniel led me to the Stratosphere Casino. Its Space Needle style of architecture had been visible to us even from the far end of the Strip.

Once we got there, Daniel motioned toward the entrance. "Here we are. Follow me." I followed him inside, through the video poker and slot machine banks, around the table games, and into the elevator. After a long ride, we exited the elevator at the top, and Daniel began to walk toward a booth with a black curtain around it.

"Check it out, dude. This is, like, a roller coaster video game!"

I was, confused. "Wait, what? What do you mean?"

"You pay your money, they strap you in inside that booth, you pick a track, and sit back. A big projector screen in the booth shows the track, and the booth tilts, spins, and shakes. There's even a fan to simulate the wind rushing by. It feels just like you are there!"

"Oh, wow!" I interjected. "Let's go!"

We hurried over to the entrance. Fortunately, there was no line, so the only thing separating us from the ride was the eight-dollar fee. Daniel requested the scariest track as he forked over the cash.

We climbed in and began the ride. It was realistic and scary. I was riveted, white-knuckling it the entire trip. It felt so real that I worried we might fall off the track at any moment.

When the ride was over, I begged Daniel to let us go again. He laughed as he paid the ride operator for a second terrifying trip. It was crazy – I wanted one for our apartment.

At the conclusion of our second trip, we went to the outside of the top of the Stratosphere to find a ride called "Big Shot" (I think...I was both tipsy and dizzy at the time). It was essentially a free-fall roller coaster. The coaster shot you straight up and let you plunge back to the bottom. At my insistence, we rode it twice, and then headed out. I'm surprised I was able to keep my alcohol down.

"Ready for part two?" Daniel inquired.

"Yeah, of course!" I exclaimed. "What are we waiting for?"

We made our way back to the bottom of the casino and hailed a cab. Daniel told the driver to take us to the Crazy Horse Too. The Crazy Horse was a "gentleman's club." Even *I* knew that meant "strip club."

I had yet to set foot inside a strip club. The Paper Moon in Richmond had had a twenty-one-year minimum, so I'd never even had the opportunity. I was sure that this would be an enlightening experience.

We hopped out of the cab at the Crazy Horse Too and strolled inside. A formidable bouncer collected the cover charge and escorted us into the main area of the club. I observed a stage with several poles on it, all of them full of impossibly attractive, gyrating women; the bar to our left was stocked with everything I'd need to find the courage to approach them.

The two of us sat down at the bar and began conversing with the ravishing, buxom brunette tending it. Moments later, we had drinks (and the attention of gorgeous ladies of every type). I kept turning them down, though. I needed far more liquor to overcome my shyness around all these tens.

We finished our Smirnoff Ices too slowly, so Daniel suggested that we try something new. He called Misty over and said, "Make us something with fruit juice that'll go down easy so my friend here can work his magic with the ladies."

Misty grinned and winked at me, making me redden a bit, then ducked down behind the counter and whipped up two more drinks for us. I sipped mine tentatively, but it tasted almost exactly like orange juice. Our drinks vanished like Copperfield with the IRS on his tail, so we ordered more.

Within an hour, I was feeling very loose. The next girl that came over was a sexy redhead with dangerous curves in all the right places. She was wearing a white ten-gallon hat, white leather chaps, a white, leather, beaded top with fringes, and white cowgirl boots with spurs. I couldn't stop gawking at her.

The cowgirl removed her hat and leaned over, whispering, her sultry voice filling my defenseless ear. "Would you like a dance, darlin'?"

I wanted nothing more than I wanted a dance from this Southern beauty queen, but I was still shy. "Er," I stammered, "I'd love one, but not out here. Is there somewhere more private we can go?"

She winked, still smiling, and took me by the hand. She led me through a doorway, then down a hallway in the back with a series of rooms along it on both sides. My cowgirl pulled me into the third room on the right, gently closed the wooden door, and playfully shoved me, making me fall backward onto a plush king-size bed.

Sandi (with an "i", she pointed out) rattled off the prices and asked me what I wanted. "Just whatever the best experience is," I slurred, loving every moment of it. Sandi smiled and slipped out of her restrictive clothing. *Yes, I chose wisely*, I thought.

A new song began, and Sandi danced for me...and around me...and on me. She swayed and rocked, pressing herself against me as she moved to the beat of a song I didn't know. She took very good care of me, but the song was over all too quickly.

Sandi leaned down and whispered, her full, red lips millimeters from my ear. "Can I bring a friend to help entertain you?"

I grinned. How could I refuse such a generous offer? "Of course!"

Sandi walked out, hips wiggling, as I counted the seconds until her return. She was back in less than a minute with a sumptuous brunette who was displaying her assets in a Pocahontas costume. The newcomer, Carly, introduced herself and climbed out of her beaded buckskin outfit. Another song began moments later, and the two ladies got to work.

Carly and Sandi sashayed and gyrated in ways I'd previously believed defied the laws of physics. I wasn't allowed to touch them, but they *were* allowed to touch *me*, and the dancing duo wasn't shy about making physical contact with me. They unbuttoned my shirt, ran their painted nails down to my stomach, and rubbed up against my face from time to time.

Plenty of love was shown to me; I had to have them for one more song. They weren't stingy the second time, either – I got my money's worth. Once the second song ended, a very happy Eddie was ready to settle up.

"That was great, ladies. I've never been treated so well. How much do I owe you gorgeous gals?"

"Four-fifty for me, three hundred for Carly," Sandi smiled.

I pulled out a wad of cash and doled it out. "Here's your four-fifty, and your three," I said, counting the cash, "and an extra three for you, Sandi, and two more for Carly."

They were pleased with the tip. Carly and Sandi leaned over and kissed me simultaneously on opposite cheeks.

"When you come back, honey, you ask for us, 'k?" Sandi said.

"Oh, you know it," I nodded eagerly.

"Bye now, baby," Carly cooed, waving as I wandered out of the VIP room.

I headed to the front to locate Daniel. After a few minutes, I saw him by the stage, handing a dancer ten-dollar bills.

"You ready to go?" he asked, glancing over at me.

"Yeah." I grinned sheepishly.

"I take it that you got what we came for," he teased.

I punched him in the arm. "You might say that."

We left and Daniel hailed another taxi.

"Where to?" the Greek cabbie asked, turning to face us.

Daniel pointed. "To the Bellagio!"

* * *

Still well under the influence, we arrived at the Bellagio hotel and casino. The Bellagio was enormous and elegant, with a world-famous fountain show out front that drew crowds of hundreds of people.

We went inside; we were on a mission. In the foyer was a large fountain surrounded by plants, with a beautiful painted ceiling reminiscent of some of the work of the Renaissance masters.

We found a blackjack table and jumped right into the action, betting fifty dollars a hand. We kept ordering drinks, and we kept winning. Our stacks of chips didn't grow rapidly, but they did grow steadily. Within two hours, we were ahead a combined seven hundred dollars.

I was itching to throw the dice again and repeat my previous night's performance. "Let's go play craps," I mumbled.

Daniel and I carried off our chips, ignoring the dealer's request to color our chips up to larger-denomination ones. We headed to the craps pit; however, it took us several minutes to find a table with two open spots. We settled in and prepared to bet.

Daniel's first few throws sucked, to be blunt. Mine were no better, though, despite my best efforts. Between our terrible rolls and betting on other players' terrible rolls, we quickly dropped all of our winnings and some of our own cash. It was looking bad, but we were too drunk to care.

That's when Lady Luck finally gave us her blessing. An old man in a brown leather jacket and cowboy hat stepped in and took the dice, betting with bravado. I decided to ride along with him, putting a green twenty-five-dollar chip on the line. Daniel, skeptical of the old man's prowess, opted to wait. That would come back to bite him in the wallet later.

The shooter hit four sevens to start his turn, then a four, making four his point. I bet one-oh-eight across, but he rolled the four immediately. He was on fire, and everyone but Daniel knew it. Cowboy tossed out a handful of chips to bet all the numbers like I had. He even put up some dealer bets.

Point after point, he was a juggernaut. I pushed my bets rapidly higher; Daniel got in on the action, but he was late to the party. Cowboy's bets also piled up, but his sobriety kept him from stacking them as tall as I had mine.

A crowd had gathered around us. The gaming floor was a plutonium atom; our craps table was its nucleus. I'd begun drinking White Russians by this time. Between that sweet ambrosia

and the rack full of chips I was accumulating, I was feeling wonderful. Beautiful women pressed in on us, trying to score a few chips or secure a date with the newly pseudo-rich.

An hour of fun later, though, the roll ended, as all good things must. Cowboy tossed the dice sloppily, and one of the dice careened off the dealer's hundred-dollar-chip working stack. The dice settled on a seven-out, as any gambler can tell you will happen when you do that.

Groans and moans reverberated throughout the pit for a moment, but they were quickly exiled by hoots, cheers, and applause. Several people tossed Cowboy chips, so I grabbed a few black chips and chucked them to him.

Players began coloring up and receiving smaller amounts of high-value chips. I had to wait my turn, but I was anxious, so I tried to assess my winnings. Being that drunk, however, was an insurmountable obstacle. Every time I passed three grand, I lost track and had to begin again.

Finally, the dealer pulled my chips in and he and the box man counted them up. After double-checking their totals, the dealer handed off my new chips. I picked the foreign chips up and stared at them incredulously. He'd given me two large, gray five-thousand-dollar chips, a large, golden one-thousand-dollar chip, and an assortment of smaller ones. I tossed all the smaller chips to the dealers, who happily thanked me.

"Let's go, Daniel," I said, dizzy.

"Okay. I'm gonna go cash out!"

I paused. "Oh, yeah. I want my cash, too."

Daniel let the way to the cashier's cage, where several other people were collecting their winnings. The kind, heavysset black woman cashing me out had to photocopy my ID for tax-reporting purposes; once she did so, she counted out eleven thousand dollars in crispy Benjamins. I folded it all up the best I could, stuffed it into my pockets, and we headed out.

The ride back was short, but we were psyched about the knots of cash in our pockets. We gabbed excitedly, and Daniel told me to get ready for the last part of my birthday celebration. I had well over eleven thousand dollars in my pockets. *What could possibly top this?* I wondered.

We arrived "home" and got to our room the best we could in our inebriated state. Daniel threw the door open and we stumbled into the suite. He grabbed the cordless phone and punched in a number, walking off to the bedroom. I heard muffled voices, but I couldn't make out the words. A minute later, Daniel returned, a smirk on his face. He placed the handset back on the charging station.

"Ready for dessert?" Daniel asked as his grin widened. He pulled a bottle of Patrón out of the refrigerator and set it on the table between a pair of glasses. We began drinking the tequila as I awaited what I figured would be my final surprise of the trip.

Fifteen minutes later, there was a soft knock at the door. Daniel opened the door and admitted two people, shutting the door behind them.

The first guest was a stunning blonde who immediately doffed her trench coat to reveal a heaving bosom, curvaceous rear, and slender thighs. This angel had full lips with red lipstick and baby-blue eyes lined with light blue mascara and a touch of glitter. Her leopard-print cutout swimsuit and matching stilettos left little to the imagination. Good thing I have a good imagination.

Our second guest was her sidekick – a hulking black security man in a black polo shirt and slacks. In his right hand was a portable stripper pole; in his left hand was a large black bag. His Herculean muscles said that he meant business – and that he didn't need a weapon to handle it.

The pair swaggered around in our suite as if they owned the entire complex. The blonde set her purse in the chair next to the one I was sitting in, while the guard stood in the corner, calmly

watching. The woman checked her makeup in her pink compact, puckered up, then smiled at each of us in turn before speaking.

"Hey, guys!" she trilled. "I'm Jasmine. I'll be your private entertainer tonight. I get five hundred for showing up, five hundred an hour, plus tips. How long did you want me for, again? Two hours?"

"That's right," Daniel confirmed. He pulled out a roll of bills, counting out fifteen hundred dollars. "Don't worry. We tip *very* well," he promised, handing over the stack of bills.

"Well," Jasmine said as she tucked the cash into her purse, "the better the tips, the better the show, so keep 'em coming." She winked, making me melt. Her escort helped her set up the pole and a boombox. She put on a sultry tune while Daniel and I dragged our chairs right up to the pole.

Jasmine began dancing, spinning in time to the music. Her fluidity and flexibility mesmerized me. My eyes wouldn't leave her body for all the Sliders at White Castle. Well, that's what I thought, until the inky darkness took me away from my new love.

* * *

I awoke to the faint sound of echoes in the distance. I struggled, trying to make out what they were saying, but I couldn't. Slowly, the voices seemed to get closer and clearer.

I finally recognized Daniel's voice. "Eddie! Eddie! Wake up, man!" He didn't sound frantic; rather, his tone was almost...amused? *What the heck is going on?* I wondered.

Slowly, my eyes creaked open. The world was very blurry and very bright, and a splitting pain invaded my skull. I squinted so fiercely that my eyes closed. I began to roll over onto my side, but sudden sharp pains forced me to abort that plan and I remained flat on my back. *What on Earth happened?*

As I lay there and attempted to assemble the jigsaw puzzle that was the previous night's adventure, waves of nausea crashed on the shores of my stomach. Pain racked my body as I shot up and bolted for the bathroom. I clutched the toilet bowl, knuckles as white as loose-leaf paper, and forfeited all rights to the contents of my stomach.

I was sore all over, but my ribs and head felt the most punished. Daniel leaned into the bathroom, chuckling.

"Hell of a time last night, huh?" he asked.

I cradled my head gently in my hands. "Owww. I don't remember a thing after Jasmine began dancing. I'm sore all over, my freakin' head hurts, my ribs *really* hurt, and I have no idea why. A hangover shouldn't do all *that*."

Daniel guffawed, much to my annoyance. "Boy, now I'm *twice* as glad that I got these. You'd never have believed me," he chuckled.

Daniel dug out his pocket digital camera and turned it on. I watched as he scrolled through the pictures: Jasmine dancing, Jasmine dancing more, Jasmine dancing on me, me shoving my head between Jasmine's thighs, me getting yanked out of my chair by Security Guy, and three more in succession of me being handed a UFC-worthy beat down by Security Guy.

"Oh, man," I groaned, wiping my face with a handful of Charmin. "No wonder I'm hurting in places that I didn't even know existed."

"Yeah," Daniel added, "plus, they took all the cash we had in our pockets. I managed to stash the camera before they started emptying our pockets out."

I panicked for moment before I remembered the eight grand I'd stashed in my top dresser drawer. "Whew," I said.

"Hang on," Daniel told me. He ran into the kitchen and returned a moment later with two Advil and a glass of apple juice. "Take these." I obeyed as quickly as my body allowed, grimacing. "Alright," Daniel continued, "pack up and let's get to the airport. Sorry, dude. I know it sucks, but we can't miss our flight home."

I grunted, but Daniel was right – as usual. I groaned and stood, shakily stumbled to my dresser, and began to repack my things. I'd hardly begun packing my luggage when a tsunami assaulted my gut. Caught completely flat-footed, I heaved directly into my half-full suitcase. As I grasped my bag with both hands, I swore off drinking forever.

* * *

The flight home was mostly uneventful, but I had to use my air-sickness bag more than once. I felt awful for the middle-aged businesswoman in the pantsuit who had angered somebody enough to end up seated to my left. She was visibly uneasy with my trips down memory lane in tangible form.

I half-grinned and shrugged by way of apology. "Sorry. *Really* rough night," I admitted sheepishly. She rolled her eyes, held her nose, and stared out her window.

We eventually landed, and I walked with Daniel to pick up his car. He had to shell out nearly twenty-five dollars before we were on our way. The drive home was mostly quiet, but Daniel did break the silence early on. "If you upchuck in my car, you are walkin' home." I made a rude gesture, to which Daniel responded with a laugh.

I reflected on my birthday celebration as I stared out the window at the passing scenery. "So, that was your gift to me. We got wasted, gambled a small fortune, I had two girls dancing all over me, we rode crazy roller coasters, I jammed my face into an insanely hot stripper, and I was robbed by that stripper and her bodyguard and beaten like I attacked a cop. I'm nauseous, sore, and probably have broken ribs under all these bruises.

"You know what I think? It...was...*awesome*. I'm never going to forget last night – at least, not what I haven't already forgotten."

* * *

I ended up going to the hospital, where my doctor ordered X-rays for my upper body. As it turned out, I did have four cracked ribs. My physician treated my injuries and told me to take it easy for a few weeks. I was only too happy to oblige.

* * *

I learned several things from this episode. I learned that I cannot hold my liquor. I learned that even a marriage to Kim Kardashian will last longer than an oath sworn during a hangover. I learned that Las Vegas can suck you in, chew you up, and spit you out.

The most important lesson I learned is the value and measure of a true friend. A friend will lie to your wife to give you an alibi when you go drinking; a true friend will grab a towel and help you clean up when you are puking up your guts the next day as though trying to come up with organs to sell on the black market.

When the chips are down, whether literally or figuratively, even a royal flush can't beat a true friend.

Chapter 10 - Unchained Malady

Be careful what you wish for. Sometimes, after you get it, you don't want it. Other times, it isn't what you thought it was. It's worst of all, though, when it's exactly what you thought it was and what you wanted, but you no longer want it – because *you* changed.

* * *

You remember Laurie, don't you? The gorgeous, fun, energetic woman I met at summer camp. I told you that we got married and that I got her pregnant. Now, it's time I told you the rest of the story.

* * *

I was twenty-four, and Laurie and I had gotten married in a small, romantic ceremony at her house. We'd only invited a few family members and close friends to witness the nuptials.

We'd cut the massive wedding cake, and I'd wiped the first piece all over my new wife's face. I can still hear the shriek Laurie let out and see the way she clawed butter cream frosting from her eyes, smiling widely in shock and surprise. The way she scooped up the apple pie and smacked me in the face with it, much to the amusement of the assembly.

I remember how Laurie kept stepping all over me while we danced. It must've been tough for her to shop for shoes, what with her two left feet. Thankfully, the stiff leather of the Oxfords I'd borrowed had immunized my toes against damage.

Gregory, Laurie's father, had graciously offered to cover all of our wedding expenses. Even though I'd been working at the Outback Steakhouse and living rent-free with his daughter, I didn't have a lot of money saved up. I'd gratefully accepted his offer.

* * *

Six months later, Laurie and I were still very in love and very in lust. She wanted to be a mother, and I wanted someone to carry on the Brantley bloodline.

As you may have imagined, Laurie wanted a girl she could take shopping and spoil. I, on the other hand, wanted a boy to take to monster truck rallies and teach baseball to. Every day, we tried to make a baby. I hoped I could be a good father, but I really wasn't sure I could.

Work had really been stressing me out, though. I worked harder than all the other dishwashers, but it never seemed to be good enough. I worked a strong forty hours a week so that I could stop stealing and lying and earn an honest living; however, it seemed like Larry might fire me on any given day. It was a load of crap.

This, in turn, led to some unfortunately times where I took out my anger and frustration on Laurie. Some days, she'd ask me a simple question, and I'd blow up at her. What is it that causes some to snap while others can maintain their cool? Was it genetics, or was it the way I was raised? The age-old dilemma – nurture versus nature.

This combustible situation continued for months, with Larry riding me like Hidalgo in the home stretch, constantly rushing me and criticizing my every move. I was about sick of it. I wanted to smash Larry so hard that his bow-tie spun around backwards.

One muggy July evening, I'd had enough. Larry gave me lip about a speck of potato on a dish that I hadn't even been responsible for. As he leaned over me, screaming at me, I exploded. I reached for a stack of oval ceramic plates and began hurling them with fury in every direction – on the ground, at the sinks, and even out the window.

"I'm tired of you, Larry," I growled, sticking my finger in his face. "I'm tired of your attitude, your beady eyes, how you refuse to do any actual work yourself, the way you sweat even in the freezer, and the way your shoes squeak on the tile floor. I quit!" Yanking my nametag off, I shoved it at Larry.

Larry's face was one of mixed fear and horror. "Y-you can't quit! You're fired!" he screamed back. "Every one of those dishes is coming out of your final check!" he added as I stomped out, slamming the kitchen door behind me.

I cursed and muttered on the long drive home. I needed a job, but I couldn't *stand* that mouth-breathing bottom-feeder. On the way home, I prayed that Laurie would understand. I didn't need to add "Pissed Laurie Off" to my list of accomplishments for the day. It had already been a record- (and dish-) breaking day.

When I got home, I let myself in; Laurie ran right up to me. *Oh, Lord, what now?* I thought, dreading what my wife was about to tell me. That's when I realized she was smiling. *Thank God*, I silently prayed, eyes closed and facing toward Heaven. *I don't think I can handle any more stress right now.*

"Honey, you ain't gonna believe it! You and I gotta call Daddy!" she chirped.

I stared warily at Laurie. "...why?" I asked.

She giggled and covered her mouth with her ring-bearing left hand. "To tell him he's finally gonna be a grandpa!" she squealed, holding a pregnancy test in front of my face. Yep, it was positive.

My jaw dropped. I hadn't known *before* if I would make a good father, but now I was in the unemployment line. There was no *way* we could raise a child yet. I closed my eyes, gritted my teeth, and steeled myself for the reaction I was about to elicit.

"Baby, I lost my job today. Larry was jerking me around again, screaming at me, and I just lost it and quit," I confessed.

Laurie stared at me in disbelief. "What? You *know* you need a job. How are we gonna pay the bills? How can we raise our little girl if we got no income? You're gonna go back there and ask Larry for your job back," Laurie commanded.

I frowned and looked out the window. "That's not exactly an option. I kind of...blew my top. I may have destroyed stacks of company property in the process." I looked back at Laurie, ashamed.

Laurie gaped. "Are you kiddin' me? You're unbelievable! What are we gonna do now?"

I shrugged. "I'll get another job, but we can't afford a child right now. You can't keep him," I retorted. I'd had my doubts before, but now I was *certain* that I wasn't ready to be a father yet.

Laurie put her hands on her hips defiantly. "Oh, no, Edgar Wallace Brantley. I'm *not* givin' my baby up. Not for adoption, not for an abortion, not for anyone or anything." A tear streaked down her cheek, and her countenance softened. She took my hand and placed it on her slightly swollen stomach. "I got a life in here. This is our *kid*, Eddie. Can't you feel her?" she pleaded.

I can't explain why I did what I did next. I yanked my hand away and slapped Laurie, her face snapping to the left at the unexpected assault. Laurie froze, then gave me a betrayed look. Tears filled her beautiful, sad blue eyes. She softly moved a hand to her cheek, and I instantly regretted what I'd done. I didn't mean to slap my wife. I loved her. Her tears were Angel Falls, staining her white dress.

Laurie turned away from me and pointed at the front door, arm and lip quivering. "Get out," she ordered, voice shaking with hurt, anger, and disappointment.

I turned for the door, then looked back at Laurie. I truly wanted to apologize for my treachery, to beg her for her forgiveness, but my bullish attitude and selfish pride got in my way. Turning back to the door, I walked out without so much as another glance behind me.

Trudging across the grass and weeds in the yard, I hopped into my Grand Am and drove over to Daniel's house. If anyone knew what to do, he did.

The whole way there, I kept seeing Laurie and the look on her face when I'd slapped her. I'd sunk to a new low. I loved her and had sworn never to raise a hand to her in anger.

When I arrived at Daniel's apartment, I hesitated before ringing the doorbell. "Just a minute," I heard him call out from inside.

A moment later, the door opened, and there stood my portly friend in a tie-dyed T-shirt, black shorts, and blue foam sandals. "C'mon in, Eddie! It's been a while since I've seen you," he said, inviting me in with a wave of his hand. Daniel closed the door behind me as I stepped inside.

We walked into the living room; I took a seat on the green vinyl couch while Daniel sat in his brown corduroy recliner, leaning back and sipping a beer. "So, what brings you by today?" he asked, smiling.

I sighed heavily, glanced around his apartment, then told him the whole tale from the top. At its conclusion, Daniel sat up and frowned, setting his drink on the pine coffee table.

"That's not good," he observed.

"I know," I admitted. "It's really, *really* not good. But what should I do?"

He scratched an ear and inspected his finger. "I think you already know what you gotta do. You have to go and apologize to Laurie and make things right. You didn't need to come talk to me to figure that out."

"But it's so hard," I protested. "I'm embarrassed and ashamed of myself. What if she won't take me back?"

"Few things in life worth doing are easy," Daniel pointed out.

I nodded absently. I hated it when he was right. Tomorrow, I'd go home, talk to Laurie, and beg her absolution. Right now didn't seem like a good time.

"What if she still insists on keeping the baby, though?" I asked.

Daniel shrugged. "Then you get another job. Two jobs. Whatever you have to do, though, you do it and make it work."

I had to agree with him. "You're absolutely right. I'll do it first thing tomorrow. I'm way too upset and ashamed to crawl back tonight," I confessed.

"Probably a good idea. I'm sure Laurie needs time to cool off as well. Make sure you go back in the morning, though. Need a place to crash tonight?" he offered.

I dismissed the offer with a wave. "Nah, I'll be fine. You've always done so much for me. I need to do this on my own."

Daniel shrugged. We caught up on some other things and I had a beer with him before we said our goodbyes. I went out to my Pontiac and we waved to each other before I drove off to find a hotel for the night.

* * *

An hour later, I'd hit up all the decent hotels in town, yet not one had had a vacancy at a price I could afford. I was exhausted, ready to collapse, so I elected to stay at the Imperial Dynasty Inn, a flophouse that catered mostly to drug dealers, junkies, and the homeless. It was a cesspool of filth, but my ego wouldn't allow me to go back to Laurie or Daniel.

I parked down the street in a gas station parking lot to avoid attracting attention to my car, then walked two blocks to the "hotel." Once I got there, I cautiously ventured inside.

The lobby of the run-down hotel was nasty. If the yellowed, peeling wallpaper didn't gross you out, the rotting wooden flooring and stairs would. If *that* didn't faze you, the roach infestation and sickening odor of mildew would dissolve even an iron stomach. It wasn't exactly the Four Seasons.

I nervously approached the rickety desk, where a man older than Father Time was seated. The wiry, slight man hardly paid attention to anything, save the tiny black-and-white television he was watching. Some old rerun was on, but the fuzzy reception derailed my efforts to identify the program. I suspected that *he* didn't know what show he was watching, either.

I cleared my throat noisily. "Excuse me. I'd like a room," I interrupted.

He didn't bat an eye. I was about to repeat myself when the man slowly turned to face me. I expected to hear the sound of his joints creaking and bones snapping as he looked my way. "How many?" he asked in a low, gravelly tone.

"Just me," I said.

"How many nights?" he rasped.

"Only tonight," I said.

"Twenty dollars," he told me, eyeing me carefully.

I pulled out a twenty and handed it to him. He looked at me again, then held the bill up to the light and scrutinized it. A grunt signified his approval.

"Room two-fourteen," he muttered, handing me a small, well-worn brass key. I took it and cautiously ascended the flimsy stairs, paranoid that the wood might give way with a single misstep.

At the top of the staircase, I looked down the hall tentatively. The two rooms in front of me were 206 and 208, so I turned right. The room would be on my left with the other even-numbered rooms. I walked slowly along the dimly-lit passageway, the fluorescent bulbs overhead flickering frequently but with no discernible pattern.

I stopped once 214 was to my left. I wasn't looking forward to the prospects within as I turned the rusty knob. It was already unlocked, and the door creaked open. Fumbling for the switch, I turned on the light. A light came on, but the dim bulb barely illuminated the room.

I stepped inside to survey the room. The filthy old curtains flapped in the breeze from the shattered window. There was a rough desk, chipped, nicked, and stained, but no chair. The bed sheets had mold spots that speckled the otherwise yellow linens; the pillowcase was likewise dotted. The stench of mildew and decay saturated the air like a toxic fog. I could already tell that it was going to be a *great* night.

* * *

The next day, I work up only slightly refreshed. I was awoken a bit after midnight by gunfire, but I was so spent that I passed out again almost immediately. The mildew messed with me, making my sleep more restless, but the window being "open" had mitigated its effects slightly. *Time to face the day*, I told myself.

I sat up and looked around the meager room. Not much had changed. If anything, the sunbeams highlighted the atrocious state of the room, making it look worse than it had the night before, if that were even possible.

I hurriedly cleaned myself up and left the room. Creeping down to the lobby, I handed my key to the clerk. He didn't acknowledge my presence beyond accepting the key from me.

Unable to decide what to do, I sat against the wall in the lobby, my head in my hands. Even after a night's rest (using the word "rest" loosely) I still couldn't go back to Laurie. I still loved her, oh God did I love her, but I was so ashamed and humiliated. It would've been easier to scale Mount Everest than to go crawling back to Laurie after what I'd done.

"Yo," a voice called out, snapping me out of my moping.

I glanced up to see a scruffy man, about my age. He was wearing ragged, baggy jeans, black Converse low-tops, and a grimy, formerly white Yankees jersey. His black hair was several

inches long and untended, as was his goatee. He peered at me curiously with his eyes – one brown, one blue.

"Yo," he repeated. "You don't belong here. What you doin' here?"

I held my hands up. "It's cool. I was just leaving. I don't want any trouble," I told him, eyes averted.

He grabbed my arm firmly, but not roughly. "Naw, man, I ain't mean it like that. I mean, you don't look like you belong in this dump. What, you down on your luck?"

His softened expression flushed away my fear and distrust. I looked at him for a moment before deciding he was genuinely concerned. I decided to spill my guts to this stranger. After all, I'd probably never see him again, anyway.

"I screwed up. I screwed up bad," I confessed, easing my burden. "I left my wife at home. I hit her and she told me to leave."

He pondered that for a moment. "So, why did you hit her?"

I shrugged. "I just sorta, you know, snapped. I was under a lot of pressure from my boss at work, so I stormed out of there after quitting my job, *then* I found out my wife is pregnant...I mean, it was just too much all at once." I paused. "I'd take it all back if I could, but I'm just so angry with myself and humiliated. I can't even look at myself in the mirror."

The man studied me again, then stuck his hand out. "I'm Mitch, but people call me Big Eight. What's your name?"

I shook his hand timidly. "Eddie. Nice to meet you."

Mitch spread his arms wide. "So, Eddie, tell me the whole story, and let's see what I can do to help."

I shrugged, then recounted my story from the top, sparing no detail. Mitch nodded and "mmhmmmed" a few times during the tale. Once I'd finished, Mitch held his hands out, palms upward.

"The answer is simple. You can come stay at my place," Mitch pronounced. "It's no mansion, but it's way better than this deathtrap."

I considered Mitch's offer. I didn't know him, but this would keep me from having to either go home or impose on Daniel. I'd asked too much of Daniel already. I couldn't go home yet or ask to stay with Daniel long-term again.

"I'll do it," I announced, standing and clapping Mitch on the back. "How can I repay you? I don't have money."

"Oh, it's no biggie," Mitch said, smiling. "Just keep the place clean and do little errands. I'll handle the rest," he promised. "Okay. Follow me."

The two of us walked outside to his car, a classic Cutlass Supreme: black, clean, and showroom-new in appearance. I was shocked. Given his own manner of dress, I'd expected the car to be a piece of junk.

At his invitation, I slid into the passenger's seat, while Mitch climbed behind the wheel. Mitch fired up his car and fiddled with the CD player until he found a Bumpy Knucklez track that he liked. Then we drove over to his place, discussing what it would be like there. I decided to come back for my Grand Am later, after I'd settled in.

Once we got to Mitch's place, I saw that it was a decent-sized single-story house with yellowing paint; the yard was out of sorts, with knee-high grass and vines growing around the base of his house. The small wooden porch wasn't brand new, but it seemed sturdy enough.

Mitch shut off the Cutlass and led me inside. The interior of the house was messy, with far less furniture than I'd anticipated. The living room merely had an old twenty-five-inch color

television, a stand for it, a couch, and a chair. Though the furniture was dirty and stained, I wasn't about to complain.

Two anorexic-looking women were slouched against the wall in the hallway. Mitch prodded the snoring one with his foot. "Babe, you got to go," he told her, softly. She quietly moaned but didn't stir. "I said get the hell out!" Mitch barked, kicking the woman savagely in her protruding ribs. She cried out in pain, and both women stood and staggered out of the house.

So, this is a crack house, I realized. The empty baggies and the occasional spoon and needle were dead giveaways. I wasn't thrilled about living in a crack house. Fine. I'll admit it. It terrified me. Again, though, my ego told me that I couldn't go back. I grumbled to myself and decided that, for better or worse, I'd have to suck it up and stick it out.

* * *

So I stuck around, cleaning up, cutting the grass, and doing general housework. I was a regular housewife. When I first arrived, I'd planned on staying for just a few days. Days turned into weeks, weeks into months. I guess no matter how bad you have it, you'll adapt to it and get used to it, or you'll die. Acclimatize or perish. Humans have the incredible ability to adapt to radically different environments than they are used to.

That was my fifth sin. Sadly, it wasn't even my worst – there are more to come. The key lesson I learned was to beware the perils of being too proud. Nobody should be ashamed of their station in life, their finances, their home, or themselves; however, too much pride can cause a person to lose sight of what's most important to them, causing them to act irrationally.

Humility is a priceless trait – it keeps you focused, grounded, and prepared. Too much pride makes you crazy and out of touch with reality. Too much pride made me forsake the woman whom I loved more than life itself.

Chapter 11 - Water, Water, Everywhere

Life is a strange and wonderful thing. It is multi-faceted and confusing, but you aren't born with a rulebook or orientation package. You have to learn it as you go. You never know when God will call you home, either. By the time you get good at playing the game, you might have to pass the controller on to the next player.

* * *

Let's venture backwards a bit, to the year before I married Laurie, to visit one more memory that I'd like to share with you. I hope that you will see that I'm not really a bad guy. I screw a lot of things up, and I know I don't deserve much sympathy, but I regret my sins, lapses in judgment, and stupidity. I really do. Nothing makes me happier than the chance to do a good deed.

* * *

It all began on a warm, breezy morning in late May. Daniel and I were headed to the beach to lie in the sun and let the Atlantic Ocean wash over us. I'd packed an ice chest full of Dr. Pepper, Coca-Cola, ice cream, and cold cuts; we'd put paper bowls and plates, plastic utensils, and napkins in a zippered canvas tote bag that Daniel was responsible for.

More than anything, I was looking forward to sculpting the sand and fighting off the salty seawater, while Daniel wanted to catch a tan in the late spring sun. I'd been teasing Daniel about

his pasty white complexion for a while. We had our sunblock, shades, and a decent beach umbrella, so we were as prepared as we could be.

"How long 'til we get there?" I asked, eagerly.

Daniel checked the dashboard clock. "I dunno. Ten minutes? What's the big hurry? You have a date?" He grinned at me.

"No!" I reacted, a tad too quickly. "Laurie isn't coming. I'm going to see her when she makes the drive in a couple of weeks, though," I answered, more calmly.

Daniel playfully punched me in the shoulder. "You kids are serious now, ain't ya?"

I nodded. "Yeah, Laurie is something else. She's got a fiery spark inside her. Plus, we are sooo compatible. I can talk to her about anything."

"Even the time you approached the altar at the Hand of God Assembly Church during prayer call? When you tripped, tackling Pastor Hughes and knocking over the pulpit and one of the large candleholders?" Daniel chortled. "You nearly burned the church down and got banned for a year. What I wouldn't give to have caught *that* on tape!"

I blushed. That hadn't been my finest hour. How many people actually get barred from a church? "I could tell her that, if I wanted to. I just don't feel like it," I retorted.

Daniel slapped the steering wheel and guffawed. "Sure. Sure you can."

I folded my arms across my chest defiantly. We made more small talk until we arrived at the beach. When I saw the white dunes through the tall, rickety wooden fence, I knew we'd finally reached our destination.

Daniel parked and we hopped out. I glanced at the large rules sign, despite the fact that I'd long since memorized it. It couldn't be helped – the large, white metal sign with the peeling sticker-letters was posted front and center, near the entrance.

Daniel popped the trunk and we headed to it. I grabbed the huge, blue, plastic Coleman cooler with both hands while my friend hauled the remainder of our gear. We entered the beach area and snagged an open spot near the water without difficulty. We unfurled the blanket and propped up the folding chair; I'd have exclusive use of the chair. I jammed the umbrella's pole into the sand and adjusted it. We were ready to do our thing.

The two of us enjoyed our beach getaway. We had all the ice-cold refreshments, sun, sand, ice cream, and cool water we could ask for. After pestering Daniel for a while, I even managed to cajole him into helping me build a giant sand scorpion; however, despite his help, it didn't come out anything like I'd envisioned it. We let a few kids playing nearby have the pleasure of razing the faulty sculpture.

Around three in the afternoon – far too late – I realized that our sunscreen was *not* waterproof as advertised; my already pinkening skin proved it. I wasn't sore yet, but I knew that I'd be hurting in the morning.

"I'm about finished tanning," Daniel informed me. "Are you ready to head out?"

"Yeah, I've had my fun. I'm ready when you are," I remarked.

We packed up our gear, brushing as much sand off everything as possible. The blanket stood no chance of becoming sand-free – it'd have to remain soiled until we could toss it into the wash. Once Daniel and I had packed everything into the car, we climbed in. I'd miss the smell of the briny ocean and the crabs and fish (but not the jellyfish) lurking about.

Daniel started the car and pulled out to head for home.

"So, did you have fun?" I asked.

"Yeah, it was alright. It wasn't crowded, though. We might have to come back again during the week. Did you have a good time?"

"Well," I began, "other than washing off my sunblock and morphing into Lobster Boy, I had a pretty good time. You really need to work on your sand-sculpting skills, though."

"Psht. Not me," Daniel retorted, rolling his eyes. "You're the one wanting to do it. *You* go get a degree in Beach Construction."

We entered a hilly section along the ocean. I watched the water below as I rode along; the water crashing into the hillside twenty feet beneath us was oddly soothing.

Daniel slowed down and eased around another turn. I glanced in the side-view mirror and spotted a small, yellow Ford some distance behind us. I hoped it wouldn't try to pass us on this dangerous highway.

We continued on, and I reverted to watching the Atlantic. I could barely make out the sound of the waves below as they smacked the hills we were driving on. I glanced in the mirror again, watching the bright yellow car as it negotiated the curves. The car was there – then it wasn't. It had vanished.

I shot up and turned around, looking for the vehicle. It was nowhere to be found. My mind raced as it dawned on me what had happened. There were no other roads along this stretch of highway. That meant that the Ford had – impossible! The thought sickened me, but I had to act.

"Daniel!" I screamed. "Turn around! I think that Ford drove off the road, into the water!"

Daniel looked at me, his bewilderment evident. "What are you talking about? What Ford?"

"That little yellow car that was following us. I watched it disappear in the mirror. I think it went off the edge. Turn around!" I urged.

Daniel looked at me as though I'd lost my mind, but he slowed down and checked for traffic before making a three-point turn in the road. He and I craned our necks as we retraced our path, searching for any sign of the yellow car. A minute later, Daniel spotted it.

"There!" he pointed, slamming on his brakes. The anti-lock brakes stuttered as we skidded to a stop. He pulled off the safe side of the road and threw the transmission into "park." We jumped out and ran to the edge of the highway, then stepped through the fresh hole in the guardrail and crawled down to where the dirt dropped off a few feet vertically to the ocean below.

"Call nine-one-one, but stay here," I instructed. "I'll need you to help me get back up here to the top."

"Okay," Daniel uttered through clenched teeth. "Hurry!"

"Wow. I *think* I figured that *out*," I snapped.

I yanked my shirt over my head and tossed it to the ground. Leaping into the water, I realized that I'd have to doggie-paddle, since I'd never learned to swim. Damn. At least the car wasn't too far from the shore; unfortunately, it was already halfway submerged.

I paddled to the car and peered inside. A woman and a teenage girl were in the front, trying in vain to open the doors; the pressure hadn't equalized yet. A young boy in the back was frantically struggling with his seatbelt, trying to unlatch it. The salty water hadn't reached him. Yet. I had to rescue the other two first.

I reached back and smacked the driver's window with my elbow. Slightly under the surface of the water, my blow was slowed down enough that the glass barely cracked.

That wouldn't do. I swung again, mustering up critical effort from every fiber of every muscle in my body. The safety glass exploded and water rushed in as my elbow and most of my arm plunged through the window.

I grunted, ignoring the searing pain of the glass slicing my tissue like a sous-chef scalloping potatoes, the salty seawater only making matters worse. I swatted the glittering pieces of glass

away as quickly as I could. This caused the ocean to fill the car even more rapidly, so I had to act even more swiftly.

"Get out!" I shouted over the roar of the water. "Come out the window!"

I grabbed the woman's arm and tried to yank her through the window. Getting the hint, she twisted around and fought the oncoming torrent to squeeze through the narrow opening; seconds later, she broke the surface of the Atlantic.

"Help me!" she pleaded. "I can't swim!"

Of course you can't, I grumbled, cursing myself for not paying more attention to the swimming instructors at the YMCA. "Hold on to me. I'll get you back!" I vowed.

I turned toward Daniel and paddled furiously as the lady clutched my shoulders, coughing and hacking up seawater. I wasn't used to a water-logged woman clinging to me for dear life, and I paddled until I thought my heart would explode in my chest.

A minute passed before I got us to the shallow sand at the edge of the water. I hoisted the woman up to Daniel, who grabbed her arms and pulled her up to where he was. She sat down, dazed, with her head between her knees, still coughing.

The girl (who I guessed was her daughter) was swimming toward us. She'd seen me pull her mother out and followed us. She quickly reached us, and Daniel and I helped the teen up to her mother. The woman snapped out of her stupor and stared at the spot where her car used to be – it was already near the ocean floor ten feet below the surface.

"Jason!" she wailed. "Oh, my God! No! Please save Jason!"

I leapt back into the ocean and paddled until I was above the car. Holding a deep breath, I said a silent prayer and slipped beneath the surface.

When I reached the window, I could barely discern Jason's silhouette. He was still grappling with his seatbelt, albeit weakly. Entering through the window that I'd busted out, I maneuvered to the back seat as best I could. I reached for his belt buckle and discovered that it was stuck. I jerked it and pulled it, but my efforts were fruitless, and Jason had gone limp. I realized that my own oxygen was running out as well.

Thinking quickly, I whipped my Swiss Army pocketknife from my front pocket and began sawing at the belt. It took half a minute to saw through the chest strap and pull the lap belt free.

Clutching Jason, I dragged the boy to the front and out the window as quickly as I dared. As I broke the surface, I gasped for air, and I could hear frantic yelling, though the words were foreign to me. My heart thumping in my eardrums drowned out all else.

I made it to shore and Daniel lifted Jason up. He laid the boy down and pulled me up to rejoin the others. Jason's mother was in agony, but I knew what I had to do.

"I know CPR!" I shouted, grabbing Jason and carrying him to level ground. I laid him down once more. He looked so peaceful, so innocent. He could almost be asleep. In fact, he was about the same age Lenny had been when he'd passed on. Peaceful...sleep...Lenny...

"NO!" I roared, snapping back to the present. I'd caused Lenny to die, but I was going to save Jason. Death was not welcome here.

"Can you hear me?" I shouted into each of Jason's ears. I put my own ear right next to his mouth. No response. I placed two fingers on his neck – his pulse was weak, and he wasn't breathing.

Using my index finger, I moved Jason's tongue so it wouldn't block his airway. Then I pinched his nose shut and breathed into his lungs to try to get him breathing on his own again. It didn't work. I tried to breathe life into him once more; again, I failed.

This little angel in front of me couldn't die. I wouldn't allow it. Again I pinched Jason's nose closed and exhaled into his lungs, praying for a miracle. Near the end of this third attempt, Jason started shaking and sat up abruptly, coughing up water. He sputtered and hacked a few times while I held his mother back. "Let him catch his breath," I warned.

That's when the police and paramedics arrived. In my hyper-focused state, I hadn't heard the sirens. The emergency responders rushed over to triage us. The woman, Daniel, and I explained what had happened, while the medics examined us.

"You'd better come with us, sir," a female EMT told me.

"Why?" I asked. That's when I looked down and realized that my right arm was covered in blood from a deep gash and several other cuts. Blood had found its way onto my chest and swimming trunks, as well; I decided to follow the EMT to one of the ambulances.

She cleaned up the wound and checked me out. She wanted to take me to the hospital after she wrapped it up, but I wanted to ensure that everyone else was okay first. The mother and daughter were treated for cuts and scrapes from the bits of glass in the window and the accident itself. Jason was distraught and shaky, but none the worse for wear.

"Oh, my God!" the mother said to me, incredulously. "You saved all our lives! You saved my little boy's life! How can I ever repay you?"

I shrugged with my left arm. "I'm still paying on debts that I owe," I confessed. "You don't owe me a thing. What happened, anyway?"

She frowned in thought. "I was driving them home for dinner, checking a text from my husband, when a curve popped up right in front of us. I stomped on the brakes, they locked up, and we slid right through the railing and into the water. I shouldn't have been messing with the phone or driving so fast. I was rushing home because we were already late for dinner and my husband had been expecting us home."

"Well, at least now you have a good excuse," I offered wryly.

The woman smiled a little. "I suppose so."

Daniel lent his cell phone to the grateful woman, who immediately called her husband to come and pick them up. Daniel and I filled out witness statements while we waited with them for her husband to show up.

As soon as he arrived, he worriedly ran over to his spouse. She explained everything that had happened as tears welled up in his eyes. He took my unhurt hand in both of his and shook it vigorously.

"You have no idea what this means to me, sir. I can't imagine losing Kayla, Jason, or my wife, Lily. I don't think I could go on without them. What can I do for you in return? Anything. Just say the word."

I paused and thought for a moment. "Just keep them, love them, and protect them. And don't text Lily while she's driving," I added.

He shook his head with regret. "I won't do it again. I feel horrible. I'm forever in your debt," he told me. "I'll make sure my insurance covers your medical bills. It's the least I can do for your heroism."

I thanked him and gave him my information. Lily, Kayla, and Jason gave me a group hug and a tearful goodbye. Daniel spoke with me for a moment, then everyone waved to me as the EMTs loaded me into an ambulance to take me to the emergency room.

* * *

Thirty-one stitches went into my arm from that little adventure. The stitches, the pain, the water I sucked down – I wouldn't trade it for all the gold ransomed for Montezuma. I had yanked the Grim Reaper's scythe from their throats and sent him home, scorned and empty-handed.

It doesn't take an accident to make a hero. Anyone can be a hero. Help people. Teach people. Spread kindness, love, and forgiveness, not bigotry and hate. When you see someone in need, do whatever you can to fix their situation. Make the world a better place for your brief journey through it, and the world will remember you for it.

Chapter 12 - Crystal Clear

When you are in need, don't be afraid to ask for help. Ask friends, ask family, but beware who you ask. There are some people you just don't want to be indebted to. A sense of obligation may only be psychological, but it can be as steely and confining as a prison cell.

* * *

I was twenty-five, and I'd been living with Mitch (and random people that came through) for over a year now. If I somehow hadn't known before that he was a drug dealer, I did by this point. He dealt various drugs, including pot and Ecstasy, but the majority of his sales were crystal meth. A lot of people around here liked their meth, and some of them were pillars of the community.

Mitch had never approached me about dealing for him. I kept the place clean (all things considered) and ran simple errands, and Mitch gave me my own spartan bedroom and even a bit of an allowance. At first, Mitch would take his customers into a different room to handle business, but as I earned his trust, he began conducting sales before my very eyes.

The following week, though, things changed. Mitch came home in a foul mood, swearing a blue, black, and green streak and grumbling about Joey-whomever doing something to incite Mitch's wrath. I knew better than to ask. Anything that Mitch wanted me to know, he'd volunteer. All else was strictly *verboden*.

"Eddie, we gotta talk," Mitch muttered.

I leaned the broom that I'd been using against the wall, in the corner. "What's up?"

Mitch stared at me. "Business has been off, since I keep having to leave to deal with stupid people's crap. Money's tight, so I can't give you an allowance anymore."

I was crushed. There went the Nintendo Wii with the Wii Fit game I'd had my eye on. "Oh, well. No big deal," I lied unconvincingly.

Mitch grinned. "It's okay, though. I know a way to solve both of our problems at once."

I'd been dreading that. Mitch was playing at something, but my best course of action was to play along. "What's that?"

He shrugged carelessly. "Simple. Sell my dope while I'm out taking care of other people's screw-ups. I'll start you off with an ounce until you get used to it, and give you five percent on sales. Down the road, if you wanna do it full-time on the streets, I'll just sell it to you at a discount and you'll make a killing."

At first, I wasn't thrilled about his idea, but I considered it. I did know all the regulars (and they knew me), and I'd earn more than my allowance had been – quite a bit more. I could buy some pretty nice things. I decided to give it a shot.

"Sure," I said.

"Awesome," Mitch said, fist-bumping me. "I'll stash an ounce of crystal in your cigar box. You know where the scales and baggies are. Be accurate, but give 'em a little extra if they are repeat customers. I make plenty on it, anyway. You know my prices, right?"

I nodded. "Thirty-five for a quarter-gram, sixty for a half, a hundred a gram, two-fifty for an eight-ball."

"Right," he acknowledged. "Don't let anyone you don't know stay here, and don't sell anyone more than an eight-ball until I get a chance to put you up on game. I don't want you getting in serious trouble."

I nodded. "Okay. Now go away so I can make this money," I teased.

Mitch let a slight grin slip. He wouldn't confess it even on his deathbed, but he had a genuine softer side. Mitch stuck the drugs in my humidor and headed off to collect some debts.

I picked up with my sweeping where I'd left off, but there was a knock at the door before I'd even finished the kitchen. I went to the front door and checked the peephole. Seeing that it was Big Ray, I opened the door.

Big Ray stepped inside, talking on his iPhone. "Aight, boo, I gotta go. I'll holla later tonight after the game." He pocketed the cell phone and looked up. "Where Big Eight?"

"He's out," I informed Big Ray, "but I got ya. What you need?"

The heavysset pimp with the cane and the garish, all-purple outfit grinned. "Big Eight lettin' you hold it down? Coo. Glad to see you steppin' up, kid."

"Yeah, I guess," I answered.

"Look here. Lemme get that eight-ball," Big Ray said, handing me a wad of tens and twenties. I counted it; the whole two-fifty was there. I went to the back, measured out just over three and a half grams, bagged it, and brought it out.

"Here you go," I said, handing the bag of crystals to Big Ray.

He inspected the merchandise briefly. "Good lookin' out, cuz," he told me as he turned and left. "Tell Big Eight I said 'what up'."

"Okay," I said.

I shut the door and returned to my chores. People kept coming by, though. By the time Mitch returned, I'd sold almost half the ounce, netting myself a nice little payday. I gave Mitch the cash; he was mildly impressed.

"Not bad. Not bad at all, kid. I'ma top off your ounce. Here's your cut," he said, handing me a small wad of bills. I wasn't about to complain. I'd made over fifty bucks for very little actual work. Tomorrow was already looking up.

As time went on, I was making a fairly cushy living, just by selling at the house. Once or twice, Mitch had tried to talk me into selling out on the street, but I wasn't yet comfortable with that idea. *Maybe someday*, I thought.

My main concern, though, was the new customers. We needed new customers to make more money, but new ones could be snitches or thieves. Getting robbed was a very real concern, especially when you had drugs and money in the same place at the same time.

One cool October evening, Dolla Bill came over to pick up a gram, bringing a scruffy-looking, older black man with him. We didn't sell to new guys unless a regular vouched for them. If they vouched for the wrong guy, though, they were in deep fertilizer. The kind of deep fertilizer you never wanted to be in with a guy like Big Eight. I'd heard tales of sheer brutality and Big Eight's skill with a carving knife that guaranteed I'd never cheat him out of so much as a dollar.

"Yo, this is T-Bone. He wantin' that half-gram from you," Dolla Bill said.

"Yeah, cuz. Lemme get half a gram," T-Bone said.

I eyed the guy warily. I always had to be on the lookout for cops and scammers, making sure that new customers were really just fiends trying to score a high. As he kept scratching himself, I could tell he was a fiend.

"Aight. I need some cash," I told the two. Dolla Bill handed me some tens and T-Bone handed me a ball of dirty fives and tens. Dolla Bill's was good, but I counted only fifty in T-Bone's wad.

"I need another ten," I told T-Bone, matter-of-factly.

"Naw, cuz," T-Bone countered. "A hunned fo' a gram, fitty fo' half a gram."

"If you want a half for fifty, buy a gram and split it. Half a gram is sixty," I told him firmly.

"Man, that's some garbage," T-Bone retorted, but he handed over two more dirty five-dollar bills.

I headed to the back and got their orders ready. When I returned with the product, T-Bone was still scratching his stomach. I passed the baggies out and the pair left, so I went back to picking up trash.

That's when the fertilizer hit the fan. A black canister with orange stripes and markings came flying in through a window. Shimmering shards of glass flew through the air in bullet time as the pane exploded. I recognized the flashbang from a television special on military and SWAT gear. As quickly as I could, I turned away, closing my eyes and covering my ears with my hands.

The flashbang detonated with light and sound that pierced my defenses, but neither blinded nor deafened me. The shockwave, however, rocked the pictures on the wall and shook the floor beneath my feet. Almost immediately, the front door came crashing inward, splintering the door frame.

"Police! Hands up! Let me see your hands!" the point man screamed at me, pointing his MP5 at my chest. Without missing a beat, I dashed to the bedroom as the first two men in the door fired bursts of nine-millimeter rounds at the very spot where I'd been crouched. I threw open the window above my bed and leapt out, running toward the fence between Mitch's yard and the next one over.

Although the darkness aided my escape, a couple of the beat cops spotted me as I vaulted over the chain-link fence. At least they didn't have a helicopter for the raid – that would have ended my escape before it began.

Shouts echoed from the ranks of the police as they pursued me. Fortunately, I was fast, and their bulky gear and vests hindered their pursuit. The K-9 units couldn't jump or climb the tall wooden fences, so I quickly developed a lead, but I'd still have to cut across the street before they drove down and boxed me in.

I bolted through an old man's front yard and across the street. The only lights pointed my way were flashlights, and the street cops holding them weren't close or quick enough to see me cross over. I realized that they'd fan out after blocking off the area, so I kept heading across street after street, panting and puffing.

Sirens, shouts, and lights faded away as I put more and more distance between myself and the officers in pursuit. I was breathless, but I kept sprinting as if my life depended on it. It did. I was Marion Jones, clearing hurdle after hurdle with determination, perseverance, and a little dope.

Within fifteen minutes (that felt like fifteen hours) I'd left the residential area and reached a bodega on a street corner, so I ducked inside. The owner stocked things like hog scraps, menudo,

and those neat Mexican sodas with all the strange flavors like cactus and pineapple-coconut. It wasn't large, it wasn't that clean, but it had a few clothes and it was open.

Salsa music blasted from a radio, blaring throughout the cozy shop. The scents of fresh, low-grade cuts of meat and day-old churros battled to fill my nostrils.

Ignoring the food (hungry though I was), I headed directly to the clothing racks and grabbed a white T-shirt with "Virginia Is For Lovers!" on it in blue and red. Some gray sweatpants, a blue-and-white baseball cap with the Tidewater Tides logo on it, and a pair of reading glasses completed my metamorphosis.

I forked a third of my cash over to the elderly Hispanic lady running the register and went into the filthy bathroom. I popped the lenses out of the glasses, hastily donned my new outfit, and left the shop.

Time was not on my side. My old outfit went into the foul dumpster behind the bodega, and I quietly walked away. I couldn't locate any working pay phones as I walked down the street, so I began asking the few people that were out that late if I could borrow a phone. "No" after "no" cascaded down my ear canals, the sounds of growing hopelessness and the police preparing my cell for an extended stay.

My nerves began acting up, and I became paranoid. *What if Daniel won't even take me back in? What if I've used up my last chance with him?* I had nowhere else to go. I couldn't just waltz back into Laurie's life – not after what I'd done to her, both hitting her and then abandoning her without so much as a goodbye. I *had* to get to a phone, and fast.

"Excuse me, sir," I said to a man wearing a brown tracksuit, jogging toward me. "May I please use your phone?"

"Get outta my face before I pop you one," he growled. The man passed me and jogged away without another glance back toward me.

I continued walking along. A few minutes later, a police cruiser passed me, driving slowly and deliberately. The driver and his partner studied me carefully as they went by. Ten feet behind me, the car – and my heart – stopped. *Oh, man, I don't want to go to jail,* I thought. I held my breath.

One of the officers opened his door and, from the sound of it, poured out a cup of cold coffee onto the asphalt. He shut his door and the police car cruised away.

I exhaled and laughed giddily. I was never in danger! They couldn't catch *this* criminal mastermind. I giggled and kept walking down the road.

Minutes later, I ran into a nice, younger-looking woman who let me borrow her Nokia. I sighed as I dialed Daniel's number, dreading the upcoming conversation. The phone rang.

"Hello?" came Daniel's wonderful, wonderful voice. "Who is this?"

I hesitated, almost hanging up. "It's me, Eddie. Can you pick me up, please? It's an emergency."

There was a pregnant pause on Daniel's end. I nearly gave up all hope that he would help. "Where are you?" he asked tersely.

I had no clue where I'd run off to. I looked around for any street signs, but it was dark and I wasn't near any corners. The woman was kind enough to give Daniel directions to where we were. Daniel told me he'd be there in about fifteen minutes. He sounded unhappy (who could blame him?) but it had gone better than I'd expected.

I returned the young lady's Nokia, thanking her profusely. She smiled and went on her way as I sat down on a large cement planter along the sidewalk. I hummed to myself to help pass the time.

Nearly a quarter of an hour passed before I saw a pair of headlights coming toward me. *Daniel's finally here*, I told myself happily. I couldn't wait to get to his house, eat, and catch a shower, but I knew the catching-up and explanation would be no cakewalk.

The car rolled up to me and stopped, but Daniel wasn't behind the wheel. It was the same police officer that had scrutinized me earlier. My stomach churned.

"Hey, you," the driver called out. "Stop right there!"

I froze in fear. "Yeah?"

The officer parked and got out. His partner came around the front of the cruiser and watched me, hand on his Glock.

"What are you doing out at this time of night?" the first one asked. "There isn't much to do around this part of town, son."

"I'm just catchin' my breath, gettin' some fresh air," I replied.

"You got some ID?" the cop asked.

"No, I left it at home. Actually, my friend is coming to pick me up. He should be here any minute now."

The cop grunted. "What's your name?"

"Flint. Alex Flint," I lied. My lying had gotten a lot better ever since I'd become a crack house employee.

The cop frowned before calling it in on his radio. A minute later, the dispatcher replied that I had no outstanding warrants. The officer didn't bother to check for any mediocre ones.

"I'm going to pat you down for my safety," the officer informed me. I assumed the position and he frisked me thoroughly. When I came up clean, I recalled the cash I'd had. I'd left it in my other clothes. *Son of a gun!*

"No wallet? Nothing at all? Not even a stick of gum," the beat cop remarked, suspicion in his voice.

"I don't carry stuff around," I explained.

He was about to make another comment when Daniel pulled up. *Thank God*. I grinned to myself but kept my poker face. Daniel hopped out, leaving his car running.

"Here's my ride," I told the officer. "May I go now?"

He looked from me to Daniel, then back to me, and told me that I could leave. With a silent "thank you" to God, I got into Daniel's car. He pulled out and we headed to his apartment.

* * *

The ride home was a tense, quiet one. As soon as we got to Daniel's house, though, he demanded a full explanation. I told him *everything*, holding nothing back, figuring that he'd be mad. On the contrary, he had been worried to death about me, not knowing if I was even still alive.

Daniel was incredibly relieved to hear from me, but part of him was understandably angry. Daniel let me stay with him again, since I had no money and nowhere else to go. What a friend he was. Here I was, having committed the sixth of my worst sins, and he *still* had my back.

* * *

You have to be very careful when you become indebted to someone. When they call in that marker, the price may be far higher than you anticipated. You can't put a price on a loyal friend, though. Chances are, he or she isn't even keeping score.

Chapter 13 - Down for the Count

So, yeah, now you know the worst things I've done wrong in my life. Some things I didn't mean to do, but others I did. Some were more severe than others, but that's no excuse for any of it. One thing that all these sins had in common is that every single one of them resulted in unforeseen consequences for not only myself but also others in my life – even innocent bystanders.

Sin is a ball-and-chain. It burdens you; it holds you back. It can cause you to lose confidence and respect for yourself or others. Sin is usually the result of here-and-now, selfish thinking. Sins are rarely committed when one considers others before acting.

My sins have weighed on my conscience like an anchor, preventing me from sailing off to better myself. Not a day goes by without me being reminded of them, even haunted by them, somehow. I've been the cause of anger, bedlam, and even death. Is it possible to redeem yourself after you've caused someone to die before their time? I am terrified of discovering the answer to that question.

For those of you keeping score at home, I've told you the tales of six major sins that I'm guilty of committing; however, I promised you seven. Here is the story of the seventh sin.

* * *

It was just last June, and I'd been living with Daniel again for the previous couple of years. At first, I only planned to stay with him until I could secure employment and get back on my feet. As days, weeks, and months fell off the calendar, though, I became discouraged and made less and less of an effort to find work. I didn't keep in contact with Laurie or even know what gender my child was. I settled for being a bum – sleeping all day and playing video games all night.

Daniel never became resentful, but I could tell that he was disappointed with me. Even with my checkered and colorful past, he believed that I could turn myself around and do something good with my life.

I wasn't so sure. I'd wasted so much of my life that I'd lost my ambition. I no longer cared about making money or working an honest job. It was all about doing whatever I wanted to do, whenever I wanted to do it, consequences be damned.

More and more, though, my sins caught up to me. They were harsh masters and I was a pitiful slave to them, unable to break the chains that bound me. Over time, sin and guilt cast me into a lake of fire of my own creation. I could only imagine what Hell must be like.

* * *

It was a cold morning that September. I'd just gotten up and fixed my breakfast: frozen waffles, syrup, and a glass of apple juice. Daniel walked in.

"Mornin'," he said cheerfully, grabbing a golden apple from a wicker basket on the table and biting crisply into it.

"Mmm," I mumbled, still groggy.

"Sleep good?" Daniel asked, chewing noisily.

I yawned. "Meh, not really. I had that same nightmare again," I admitted.

"The one where Lucifer casts you into Hell?" he asked.

I nodded wearily. "Yep. That one. It took me over an hour to get back to sleep, too."

He patted me gently on the shoulder. "It's alright, man. You ain't gonna go to Hell. You've actually done more good – and less evil – than most Congressmen."

I smiled in appreciation. "I think we can agree that Congress, in its entirety, is already Hell-bound," I quipped.

Daniel was trying to console me, which I was grateful for, but he was dead wrong. I was going to Hell, and I knew it. If I had lived in Dante's time, he would have reserved a circle of Hell exclusively for me. The only question was this: when would the Devil come to claim his own?

Daniel ate some Rice Krispies and headed out to his factory job. He was the lead foreman on the day shift now, working hard while I just slept and loafed around.

The place was quiet after he left. Leaving me alone with my thoughts was generally a bad idea. The demons of my past clawed around in my brain, screeching and pounding against my skull, driving away traces of precious sanity and rationality.

Lately, I'd been turning to alcohol more and more to drown out the hissing and wailing. I'd grab the jug of Smirnoff and a Wii controller, plop down on the sofa, and waste my days (and nights) there. Maybe I'd had potential once, but with all the things I'd messed up, I figured that I was out of chances.

That day wasn't much different. I grabbed the jug of bargain-basement vodka and a glass and plopped onto the couch. (You know you've hit rock-bottom when you use cheap vodka to get drunk.) Reaching for the Wiimote, I knocked the glass off the coffee table, shattering it on Daniel's parquet floor.

Swearing, I ran to the kitchen, grabbing the broom and dustpan. Once I returned to the living room, I hastily swept up the mess. It was still early, but I could already tell that a good day just wasn't in the cards.

I scurried back to the couch and turned on the television and the Nintendo 64 this time, casting the jinxed Wiimote aside. Perfect Dark was in the console, and I couldn't be bothered to change it. Joanna ran around killing Skedar until I got bored. It was my favorite Nintendo 64 game by far, but I could still only play through it for so long before it no longer held my interest.

I spent the rest of the morning moping and watching television. I didn't even bother to bring the mail in. I was just too depressed. That's when my darkest, most frightening thoughts come out to play.

Hara-kiri. Suicide. I wanted to die. I deserved to die. I hated what I had done and I hated myself for doing it. I didn't deserve to live. I should've died in Lenny's place. Why *not* take my own life? I could surrender my life to pay the debts I so sorely owed.

I decided to do it, but how should I kill myself? *That* was the sixty-four-thousand-dollar question. I knew very little about suicide. I could slit my wrists, but wouldn't that hurt? Plus, what if the slits clotted too quickly, nullifying my efforts and only leaving me in pain? Pills? I didn't know what kind I'd need, and I was terrified of taking some that would permanently injure (but not kill) me.

A brainstorm hit. *I'll hang myself!* I'd take that old hemp rope that Daniel used to tie the Christmas tree to the top of his car and wrap it around the thick support beams across the dining room ceiling. Ironically, I'd discovered how to tie a noose years ago while researching knots for my friend Jeremy's Boy Scout merit badge. *Always be prepared.* I smirked at the dark irony.

I grabbed the old rope from the closet. It was dirty, oily, and well-worn. Good. He wouldn't want to reuse it after this, in any event.

Slowly, I entered the dining room and climbed carefully onto one of the wooden chairs. Balancing precariously on the unsteady chair, I wrapped the rope around a horizontal beam several times, and then tied it. I had to make sure the beam would support my weight.

I wrapped the rope around my hand four times before cautiously lifting my feet from the chair. The beam creaked slightly, but didn't waver. I slowly lowered my feet. As I put my weight back on the chair, it tipped over onto its side.

Swearing profusely, I swung from the rope by my hand for a moment before my hand slipped out. I crashed sideways onto the chair, demolishing it and sending a piece of one of its legs flying out of the room.

"Ow! Damn it to Hell!" I cried out, grimacing. Clutching my ribcage, I stood and angrily kicked the pieces of what used to be a chair away with my foot.

Annoyed and in pain, I grabbed another chair and placed it beneath the rope. Standing carefully atop the chair, I tied a noose in the cable. Looking around sadly, almost wistfully, I shakily slipped the noose around my neck and tightened it.

I flashed back on the events that had culminated in my unenviable position: my triumphs, my failures, my lessons, my good deeds, and my sins. All of these things had guided me along this path, but it was ultimately my choice that had led to me being on top of that rickety chair with the Grim Reaper standing by to take me home. I couldn't pawn *that* off on Fate. I'd taken three from the Reaper but he was coming for partial repayment.

I sighed. *Time to go.*

My foot flung the chair out from under me. My body dropped like a sack of lead, coming to an abrupt halt before I touched the floor. The rope dug into my neck, inflicting panic and intense pain. Reflexively, I clawed at the rope around my throat as I tried to gasp for air like a careless child's goldfish, flopping around on the ground.

The note! I'd forgotten to write a note to explain everything to the people I cared about. They had no idea how tormented I was and why I was doing this, but now I was past the point of no return. That dread and final regret gnawed at me as I struggled vainly with the rope. *I have to get down somehow. Dammit, think, Eddie, think!*

The beam creaked as I fought for my life. My head felt like it was going to explode. I'm sure my face purpled as an increasingly louder ringing filled my ears. I could hear – and feel – my heart pounding, thumping, as well. *I can't die like this*, I thought. *I gotta g—*

The inky void enveloped me, relieving me of my pain and sorrow.

* * *

So, now you are up to speed on what's going on. Well, mostly. I guess I should tell you that I am lying here in a hospital bed, hooked up to machines that are keeping me alive. Their incessant beeping and whooshing is *so* annoying. Now, the doctors are talking to my loved ones about pulling the plug and letting me go.

You see, I can still think and hear. I can't tell whether or not I can see, though. If I can, then my eyes must be closed, but I'm paralyzed and can't feel anything or utter a single sound. My mouth is filled with a foul metallic taste that never goes away. Here's what I've been able to piece together from what I've heard.

It seems that my choice of rope was poor; it had snapped mere minutes after I'd hanged myself. This left me in a sorry state, indeed. Daniel came home on his lunch break, found me, and called the paramedics. I was brought here, once again, to Sentara General and hooked up to all these machines to keep me alive, albeit comatose. I suppose it's fitting, though. I was brought forth into the world here, and now I will leave this Earth behind here.

My attempted suicide made the local news, and the national media picked up the story. "Edgar Brantley attempts suicide." "Twenty-eight-year-old man discovered at home after

hanging himself." Those were the two lead-ins I heard on the hospital television. It seems that even the Virginian-Pilot ran a story on my tragedy.

One surprising development to me is that Laurie, Daniel, and my parents seem to be here a lot. They cry all the time, and Laurie whispers to me how much she still loves me. I imagine that she touches my face or holds my hand as she weeps.

I regret what I've done, but I can't tell any of them. I can't hold Laurie, tell her how much I've always loved her, or beg her to take me back. I can't kiss her or feel the way I always felt when I was with her.

Laurie told me about my son, Caleb, who will never know his father. She tells me that he has her cute little nose and my eyes and ears. He's stubborn like me but charming like Laurie. I'll never get to play catch with Caleb or teach him how to play baseball. I won't be around for his first date, his high-school graduation, or his first car.

I can't even begin to thank Daniel for all he's done for me. No matter how bad I botched things up, he was right there to help me make it right. He has saved my bacon even more times than I've told you. He's gotten me out of more jams than Smucker's makes, and *this* is the thanks I give him.

I can't tell my parents that I love and miss them. I can't hug Mom and Dad one last time and apologize for my stupidity. I can't assure them that they raised me right, that none of this is their fault. They apologize and blame themselves, but it is I, and I alone, who has earned the blame.

I can't even tell *you* my story as I lie here like a watermelon in a field, waiting to be harvested. All I can do is rehearse it in my head the way I would tell it, if only I could. They look upon my body, unaware of the forces set into motion years ago that would combine, conflict, climax, and conclude with my comatose corpse – all because of my final, *most* selfish sin.

Well, I guess it is time that I depart. Everyone is crying, and Mom and Dad are reluctantly pulling the plug on me. The doctors have told them that I will never again awaken to glimpse the light of day, and they can't bear to see me like this. I am glad, in some small way, that I can't see them right now, either. They are all devastated, heartbroken.

The machines are off; all is silent, save the sobbing and crying. I see the Grim Reaper, wielding his deadly scythe, cackling with the last laugh in our ongoing skirmishes. He hasn't forgotten about how I snatched Jason from his grasp, and it has been a long wait, but victory is ultimately his.

It has been a privilege to tell you my story, if you are indeed there. I hear someone calling my name – a voice I don't know, yet oddly familiar. It is comforting, soothing, erasing my doubts and fears. A ray of the purest white light, more white and bright than ever I have seen, washes over me. I will follow it to its end.

Epilogue - Jesus's Lessons

After an eternity – or only seconds – the light vanishes and I find myself standing in the middle of a vast field. The meadow is home to the most beautiful flowers of every color and type that I could have imagined (and some that I could not have). Small brown and white bunnies hop around in the meadow, chasing the occasional butterflies they spot flitting through the air.

An impossibly bright yellow sun shines above me, and a cool breeze carries to me the sweetest, most beautiful fragrances that ever I inhaled. To my right, I glimpse an endless lake, with the clearest, purest water that I've ever seen – it would put any Caribbean resort to shame.

"Welcome, Edgar," an incredibly complex, yet refined voice greets me. I whirl around in surprise at the sudden visitor.

A mature, healthy man with a full head of long, wavy dark hair and a full, long, dark beard stands before me. He stands tall, with the poise of nobility but an air of humility, wearing a long, flowing white robe tied with a simple golden cord. Worn leather sandals adorn His feet.

Instantly realizing who He is, I fall, awestruck, to my knees and bow face-down in the grass.

"Jesus Christ!" I sputter in shock. "My Lord! My Savior! I am not worthy of Your presence!"

"Why not, Edgar?" He asks me, curiously.

I remain on the ground. "Because I hardly went to church, Lord. The last time I set foot in a church, I nearly reduced it to a smoldering pile of cinders and ash. I am a sinner and I have fallen from grace more times than I know. Well, You already know that," I admit, my face reddening.

The Lamb chuckles and smiles, erasing my fear and shame with the extension of His hand. "Rise," He says lovingly. "Let us walk."

I take His offered hand and stand up, speechless. How could I, a filthy sinner, be worthy of His time, let alone worthy of walking alongside Him?

I gently grasp the Lord's hand again, and we begin walking. Jesus walks with flawless grace; it is as though He glides along, smoothly and effortlessly. His footsteps are so light that He does not even trample the grass or flowers beneath His feet. I cannot imagine anything that I could say or ask that would be worthy of His time or vast wisdom.

"My son, I know that you are troubled," Jesus begins as He gazes into my eyes. "I know your heart, and it is heavy with sadness and regret. Our Father takes no pleasure in the suffering of His children. Let us discuss these matters that trouble you so."

I gulp, still in pure, unadulterated awe of being in the Lord's presence. Finally, I find my voice. "My Lord, You are more perfect, graceful, loving, and merciful than I ever imagined possible. To speak with You personally is in itself a higher honor than ever I dared to hope for.

"Holiest Lamb, I have many burdens that I have brought upon myself. The first of these is the way I treated Daniel and left him. He was so good to me and I repaid him badly," I tearfully confess.

Jesus looks at me kindly. "Worry not, child. Daniel has a strong will and a good heart. You have not injured him irreparably. You are truly repentant, and you are forgiven(1). Daniel will be fine. What is your next concern?" He asks me gently.

I look away, ashamed. "My next burden is what I did to Laurie. I loved and still love her, but I left her like the thoughtless coward that I am.

"Now that I look back on it, I realize that I did to her exactly what my biological father did to my mother and me. I had sworn never to do that to my future wife. I abused her. My love didn't deserve any of that; yet, she was by my side at the very end. How can I fix this?" I ask.

Jesus looks toward the sky above us. "All men make mistakes(2). She was, indeed, faithful to you, forgiving all of your transgressions. She is a good woman and she will be rewarded for it(3). Laurie loves you even now."

I sigh. "I guess You are right. But what about my parents? They brought me up and taught me right from wrong. I don't want them to blame themselves for what I've done. They deserve better," I say, dejectedly.

"Be calm, My son," my Savior states. "They are in mourning, but Mark and Claire are resilient. For now, they blame themselves, but in time they will understand the truth. Some things take time: restoring trust, mending a broken heart, coming to grips with unpleasant truth."

I accept His wise words. I sigh again and prepare my next question. "What about Lenny, my Lord? I made him kill himself. How can I be forgiven for killing him? What does he think of me?"

Jesus smiles at me again. "Edgar, just as you are responsible for your own actions, so is Leonard responsible for his. You treated him unkindly, but he chose to take his own life. He has spoken with Me, and he understands everything now. You meant no harm, and he has forgiven you for your actions.

"He awaits you even now and longs for your forgiveness for the pain and guilt he caused with his thoughtless actions. Would you forgive him as others have forgiven you?"

My jaw drops. "Of course, my Lord! I mean, yes, Sir. I could not possibly be angry with him, especially after all I did to him to drive him to suicide."

Jesus puts His other hand on my shoulder. "As you have forgiven Leonard, so shall you be forgiven, Edgar.(4) Have you any other questions for Me, My child?"

"Yes, Jesus, I have many, but I will ask only a few," I answer.

"Ask as many as you desire. Time was invented by men; it is meaningless here. I will satisfy your curiosity and help you understand almost anything you desire. What would you ask?"

"Well," I begin, "why is there so much suffering in the world? I mean no offense, but why does God allow good people, or even any people, to suffer that way?"

Jesus sighs and gestures with His robe-covered arm. "The world of men is the way it is because of the choices men make. Our Heavenly Father allows all men and women to exercise free will and explore all His creations in their splendor. Our Father does not like to directly intercede in human events any longer – to do so takes away the very gift of free will that He gave to man.

"When each man, woman, and child has departed their temporary body, they are reunited first with Me, then the Father. All who suffer the hardships and temptations of the world of men will feel the love and compassion that I and the Lord, our God, have for them. They will spend eternity in bliss with Us, with love and happiness, if that is what they choose. They will want for nothing(5)."

I am puzzled, and my face shows it. "But what about Hell, then, and why do people get sent there?" I venture cautiously.

Jesus becomes sad. "Edgar, *no one* is sent to Hell. Souls that reject Me and the Father relegate *themselves* to Hell. Hell is simply the absence of our Creator and all His wonder. Without Him, souls cannot experience happiness, joy, pleasure, or satisfaction, for He is all of these things. These poor, lost souls can only experience sorrow, regret, pain, and misery."

I consider His answer; it makes sense. "So, why *were* we created? Why does the universe exist?" I quietly ask.

"You exist because our Father, in His infinite grace and mercy, deigned to create the universe and bestow the priceless gift of life upon some of His creations.

"The entire universe and all of creation within it and beyond it exist so that men may have lessons to learn, to become wiser, to understand and experience. Men are already exploring beyond their own world; God created vast swaths of matter and energy knowing that man would want more and more to explore and satisfy his natural curiosity. Your universe is merely a grain of sand on the beach of creation; man will one day see beyond the veil to discover even richer

new treasures that our Father has in store for him. Life, and creation, are God's ultimate gift to His children."

Realizing that Jesus is right, I am once again humbled and ashamed. I had thrown my gift of life back in God's face. I had been given the most magnificent present ever created, and I had asked if God had kept the receipt. What a way for a man to treat his Father.

I look at my Savior remorsefully. "On top of everything else, I'll never get to fish or play baseball with Caleb or take him to learn karate. I won't have the talk with him or teach him how to drive. I can't give him advice for his first date; he can't come to me with questions about growing up and becoming a man. Caleb will never know his father as anything more than a dead man lying in a hospital bed."

I begin crying uncontrollably. With a single hand on my shoulder and a loving gaze from the Lamb, I am comforted. I still regret the things I've done wrong, my poor choices, and the awful effects those decisions have had on those around me. I feel bad, still, about Lenny's death. Now, those that loved me feel the same guilty, terrible way because of me. What a monstrous thing I did.

"You still think that it is too late for forgiveness, My son," Jesus whispers. "It is not too late to repent. You are truly sorry for what you have done. You have confessed your sins in both speech and thought. You have gained much wisdom from your misdeeds. It is *never* too late for ultimate redemption, My child(6). You are redeemed, Edgar Wallace Brantley."

Jesus Christ wipes my tears away with the edge of His holy robe. Its fabric is softer than the finest silk I have ever touched, and it dries my tears before I can blink them away. He looks at me with the love only a father could have for his son and points beyond the starry horizon.

"Go."

* * *

"Eddie! Oh, my God, Eddie!" a woman screams.

She reminds me of Laurie, actually. *Oh, how I miss Laurie.*

"Eddie! You're alive!" she squeals.

I'm not alive, I think. I'm quite sure that I am dead.

Suddenly, light floods my eyes. As quickly as I can, I shut them and cover them with my arm. I hear more noise and feel hugs and kisses, but I have no idea who is doing what. I feel like a war hero returning home from Iraq with the reception I'm getting. I just hope the kisses aren't from Daniel.

Minutes later, I can finally open my eyes. I see Laurie – beautiful, wonderful, forgiving, loving Laurie. I see good old Daniel. Loyal, trustworthy, dependable, patient Daniel. I see my loving, forgiving, wise, compassionate parents crying tears of joy in the bright lights of my hospital bedroom. I could use every positive adjective in the English language and still fail to adequately convey how much all of these people mean to me.

"Daddy!" squeals none other than Caleb. He wraps his little arms around me and squeezes. I've never done anything for Caleb, yet he still loves me unconditionally. What a perfect little blond-haired, blue-eyed man. I ruffle his hair and hug him back, vowing never to leave him again.

"I love you, Daddy," he tells me matter-of-factly.

"I love you too, little guy," I croak, meaning every hard-fought word of it.

I look around the room, a blind man who has just gained the power of sight for the very first time. I take joy in the small television high on the far wall, the intravenous drip in my arm, the

machines all around my bed, the curtain by my bed, the white tiled ceiling, and even the dark brown door frame. All of it is precious to me now, and I will never again take it for granted.

Nurses rush in and see (much to their shock) that I am very much alive. I can't speak well, yet. My tongue is numb and my mouth and throat are parched. I motion toward a pitcher across the room for a drink. "Water," I groan. Laurie hurriedly pours and hands me a glass of the best water I've ever tasted. I guzzle it and motion for more. She refills the glass and hands it back; I drain it just as rapidly.

Finally, I am able to really speak. "L-laurie? Daniel? Mom? D-d-dad? Caleb?" I rasp. "I love y-you all and I'm s-sorry. I'm s-so sorry for everything."

Everyone crowds around me, hugging and kissing me again. They are all so happy that I'm alive. I can hardly believe it, but here they are. I'm so unbelievably lucky.

"Okay. He needs some rest now," the head nurse sternly orders, still baffled by my sudden recovery. "Visiting time is over. His vitals appear stable, somehow, but we need to keep him overnight for observation."

Mom and Dad kiss and hug me on their way out. Daniel hugs me warmly. Caleb hugs me again, and Laurie kisses me and embraces me tightly until the nurse ushers her out. I grin from ear to ear, but the nurse was right. I *am* tired. I lean back, falling asleep before my head even touches the pillow.

* * *

The following day, my doctor and nurses examine me carefully, almost reverently. I am in excellent health, they pronounce (much to their astonishment), so I am free to go home. Per hospital regulations, I am leaving in a wheelchair. All my family and friends are here again, and we head out to two vehicles. Once we reach the vehicles, I stop everyone.

"Mom, Dad, thank you so much for everything. I've had a lot of time to reflect and really think about things, and there are so many things that I wish I could take back. What I did to you wasn't fair. I pray that you can find it in your hearts to forgive me," I beg, a tear dropping from my eye.

"We love you, Eddie. We've never stopped loving you, and we never could," Dad tells me, clapping a hand on my shoulder. "Of course we forgive you. Every person on this Earth but Jesus Christ is a sinner. You are our son. How could a parent ever stop loving their own child?"

I just nod, eyes watering. "Thank you," I whisper.

I'm so lucky to have Mark and Claire Brantley as my parents. Even if I had the power to mold brand-new parents from scratch, I couldn't make a better mother or father than the ones I already have.

After hugging them again, we say our goodbyes, and they climb into their Corolla to head home. The four of us that remain pile into Daniel's Honda and pull away from the hospital. We ride along, Laurie and I sitting in the back, while Caleb sits up front by Daniel.

I lean forward. "Daniel, man, please forgive me. I've been a real Grade A jackass and you've always bailed me out of trouble, no questions asked. You've always been there for me. How do you manage to forgive me like that? I don't deserve all the chances you keep giving me."

Daniel glances back at me in the rear-view mirror and cracks a smile. "That's where you're wrong, Eddie. Friendship is stronger than petty squabbles. It cannot be bought or sold – only given freely. We've shared lots of adventures, both good and bad, but when you saved that woman and her two children from drowning, you proved just how good and pure your soul is. I would defend you with my last breath."

I am speechless. Had I really had such a profound effect on Daniel? Maybe I *had* done a few things right, after all. I choose to remain quiet, not spoiling the moment.

Daniel drops us off at Laurie's house and waves goodbye. We wave back and he heads home. Laurie walks Caleb and me inside, one in each hand, flanking her.

As soon as we get inside, Laurie hugs me so tightly that I can barely breathe. I hug her back and our lips meet in a fiery, passionate kiss that lasts more than a minute. When I can finally pull myself away, I lean back, gazing into Laurie's sparkling sapphire eyes.

"Laurie, I love you. I always have and I always will. You mean everything to me and I can't live without you. I was a real jerk." I take her hand. "Can you love a jerk and forgive him? Can you be with him and trust him when he swears that he will never, ever hurt you again?"

Laurie smiles sweetly, but sadly. "I do love you, Eddie. Oh, God, how I love you. You left me for years, though. I always prayed that you'd return, but it's not easy, sweetie. Give us time. Give us time to heal. I won't quit you, Eddie. I'll never quit you."

My heart dances, knowing that my true love will still give me a chance. The Lord knows I don't deserve it, but Laurie is incredibly compassionate and forgiving. I vow never to leave her or Caleb again.

* * *

It's been six months since I left the hospital. Every day, I thank God and Jesus Christ that I have that day here with my friends and family. Each day is a blessing, and tomorrow is never promised. Now, I live each day as though it is my last. I treat everyone – family, friend, and stranger – well and ensure that they know I love them.

That ordeal and my soul-searching helped me finally realize who I am. I am a sinner, but a good man. I am a loving husband to a beautiful wife and a father to a perfect son. I am me, and nobody else.

* * *

That cold December day when I got out of the hospital was a long one. We all went through my belongings, getting rid of things from my past life – my criminal life. That's when we came across a dusty Rolex.

I took Caleb to Wal-Mart that same day, telling him about some of my mistakes and teaching him right from wrong. I handed Caleb the watch, and he gleefully dropped it into the Salvation Army kettle. The Salvation Army bell-ringer was shocked and couldn't thank us enough. Caleb and I walked off, smiling and waving at the overjoyed volunteer.

I've been taking care of and raising Caleb with Laurie ever since, showing him the ropes. He's still young, but every day, I try to teach him about being a man. He's a great kid, and he will be a great man someday. I look forward to all the time we will spend together – Laurie, Caleb, and myself.

* * *

Daniel and I are at Q-Master Billiards right now. The massive pool hall is well-decorated and well-lit, and houses dozens of clean tables covered with crisp Simonis cloth. Pool cues abound, and the aroma of tasty meals wafts from the restaurant into the playing area.

Daniel shoots pool and snacks on Buddy Burgers with me for an hour or so before it nags at me too much – I have to tell him. He has to know what I experienced and why I changed.

"Daniel," I say, "come have a seat with me. I'd like to tell you something." I motion toward a chair at a nearby table.

"Okay. What's up?" he asks, taking a seat.

"I need to tell you something that happened to me. Something I haven't told *anyone* yet. Just let me finish, and please don't laugh or anything."

"Of course not," Daniel remarks.

I sigh, then I explain my entire ordeal, from the first thing I remember at the hospital to the time I awoke from my coma. I spare no details – my misery, my conversation with Jesus, my questions, and His answers. Once I am finished, Daniel rubs his head and nods in thought.

"So, you learned from all this?" he asks.

"Yeah," I answer, "I learned a lot. But how do I know whether it was real, or just a hallucination from the pain, or drugs, or whatever?"

"Well, did you turn your life around?"

I nod. "You know I have."

Daniel cocks his head slightly to the side. "And you no longer take things for granted? You enjoy life and try to live it to the fullest?"

"Of course!" I reply, defensively.

Daniel pierces my soul with his mahogany eyes. "Then it doesn't matter if it was real or not, does it?" he posits.

I take a slow sip of my ice-cold Dr. Pepper as I ponder the question. I set the can on the coaster, droplets of condensation splashing onto the lacquered wooden table. I stare at the droplets of water and think about Daniel's question. Finally, I look back at Daniel.

"No. No, it doesn't."

References

All quoted Bible passages used were sourced from the King James Version of the Holy Bible.

- (1) 1 John 1:9
- (2) Romans 3:23
- (3) Romans 2:6-7
- (4) Matthew 6:14
- (5) Revelation 21:1-7
- (6) Romans 10:13

Author's Note

Suicide is a tragedy that happens thousands of times every year in the United States of America alone. Suicide doesn't just hurt the one who commits it – everyone who cares about the victim is profoundly and permanently affected.

According to a research paper prepared by John L. McIntosh, Ph.D. for the American Association of Suicidology, in 2009 there were 36,909 suicides across the country – over 100 per *day*. Dr. McIntosh's estimates from compiled data indicate that suicide is committed somewhere in the United States *every 14.2 minutes* and that someone is *attempts* suicide *every 34 seconds!*

Furthermore, the study estimates that each suicide intimately affects at least 6 other people. For every one life that is lost, half a dozen others are irrevocably changed. Families are broken apart, parents mourn the loss of their child, children lose a parent. Perhaps most disturbing of all, though, is that *in 2009 suicide was the third leading overall cause of death among young people.*

Suicide CAN be prevented. If you or a loved one are depressed, troubled, or considering suicide, please call one of the numbers below and talk to someone, or go to <http://www.suicidehotlines.com> to find local hotlines in your state. No one's life is meaningless. Anyone can make a difference.

1-800-SUICIDE (1-800-784-2433) or 1-800-273-TALK (1-800-273-8255)

Study citation: McIntosh, J. L. (for the American Association of Suicidology). (2012). *U.S.A. suicide: 2009 official final data*. Washington, DC: American Association of Suicidology, dated January 12, 2012, downloaded from <http://www.suicidology.org>.

About the Author

I was born and raised in southeastern Virginia, in the Hampton Roads area. I have traveled to and lived in many places across the country during my life and have had many varied experiences. I've been in the Air Force, a casino dealer, a pizza delivery driver, and a cashier, among other things. I discovered my love of writing after penning a number of short stories to entertain my friends.

Some of my other hobbies include all forms of gaming, reading, bowling, camping, studying, and exploring nature. I enjoy talking to people and hearing from them. I have met many varied and interesting people during my travels, and I hope to meet many more people that I can call friends. Most importantly, though, I want to share my writing with the world.

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