

Project Vectus

Excerpt

by

Hedron Archer

Context: This scene takes place after the protagonist survives a classified medical experiment and is placed under the protection of a covert organization.

My whole world was in a blender, and all I had to hang onto was a ladder-back chair. I was in my kitchen. At least... I thought it was my kitchen. The chair was definitely mine, but everything else spun too wildly to be sure.

I wished I were sitting in that chair instead of clinging to it like a lifeline. The floor tilted under my feet, threatening to pitch me sideways. One wrong step and I'd slide right off the edge.

Crazy, right? Irrational. And I knew—in my head—the room couldn't actually be spinning.

But it all felt... so... real.

I squeezed my eyes shut a few times, hoping the dizziness would disappear. It only made the throbbing behind my right eye flare — a deep, pounding ache like someone beating a drum inside my skull. I'd heard migraines could do that, but I'd never had one before. Then another thought hit me.

Oh no. Brain tumor?

Slowly, the spinning eased and the floor settled under my feet. Okay. Kitchen. My little round thrift-store table and its four chairs came into focus. I'd bought the whole set for a steal freshman year — not bad for an aspiring business tycoon. Sure, I was only a business major, but hey... dream big.

To my right, the stove's hood light glowed — the only light on in the whole place. A short distance ahead, the microwave clock blurred in and out. I squinted. Two-thirty-something.

"A.M.?" I blurted.

The window over the sink showed nothing but pitch black. Two-thirty in the morning? No way. I didn't get up for my run until five. What was I doing awake, dressed, and in my kitchen at this hour? And how did I get here?

I live in a small, renovated mill house in the Poe Mill section of Greenville, South Carolina. Mill houses aren't big — mine least of all. The kitchen and "living room" are basically one space, divided only by a pony wall and a tragic clash of décor: cheap carpet giving way to cheaper vinyl. My bedroom sits off the living room, with the bathroom across from it, so reaching the kitchen from bed is easy enough. Even a sleepwalker could do it.

Maybe that was it. Maybe I'd been sleepwalking.

Except... I'm not a sleepwalker. And that wasn't the point. What unsettled me was the feeling that I shouldn't be here — that I was supposed to be somewhere else. Somewhere far from home.

"Don't turn around!" a voice barked.

And then there was that. Who was that? It was behind me in the living room. I started to turn anyway — instinct.

"I said, don't!" The voice sounded weird. Creepy. Cartoon-like. Disguised.

I froze and faced front again. None of this made sense. Then a horrible thought hit me like a blindside tackle.

Had I fallen off the wagon?

No. It couldn't be. I hadn't touched alcohol in two years — two years, seven months, and eight days. And yes, I was still counting.

I counted because of something my pastor told me when I first admitted my struggle:

“Don't try to conquer this in one pitched battle. Life-dominating sins”—his term for addiction— “don't fall overnight. You fight them by God's grace one day at a time.”

Then he told me about the Apostle Paul and the thorn in his flesh.

“God gave Paul grace day by day. And that's what you need too.”

From that day on, I prayed for day-by-day grace... and I counted the days.

And as part of staying sober, I didn't use anything with alcohol in it — not even cold medicine. Not since I'd “found religion,” as my ex-drinking buddies sneered.

But a drinking binge would explain everything: the odd hour; being fully dressed in the middle of the night for no reason; the memory loss; the dizziness—the stranger in my house. Everything. My stomach turned. The idea that I'd gone on a binge felt worse than the fear of a brain tumor.

My drinking problem began my senior year of high school. I was the star quarterback for the Swamp Rabbits — and I wasn't just good; I was the guy. College scouts came from everywhere just to watch me throw. One even said I had a power arm with the finesse of Joe Montana.

By senior year, I had a full-ride scholarship, a plan, a future.

Funny how life blindsides you.

For me, everything ended in the state championship — fourth quarter, 1:16 on the clock. We were down by two.

At the snap, I saw an opportunity. I changed the play.

Coach yelled something from the sidelines. Didn't hear him. Wasn't listening. I saw a wide open receiver. A chance to make a statement.

I never saw Dante.

Dante “The Inferno” Washington — an outside linebacker built like a freight train and twice as fast — hit me hard. Hard enough to change my life.

My knee twisted under his weight — pop.

His helmet smashed into my thigh — crack.

Then the world went white.

I woke up in the hospital with Coach Spirelli standing beside me, looking like he'd aged ten years.

The hit blew out my ACL. Worse, my femur shattered.

And because I fell awkwardly after releasing the throw, my throwing shoulder was ruined forever.

In an instant, everything I'd lived for evaporated: the championship, the scholarship, the NFL dream. Gone.

My life ended that day. And to cope, I crawled into a bottle and didn't come out for two years.

Two years, seven months, and eight days.

That's why this night was so significant to me. Tonight marked the night I had been sober for as long as I had been a drunk. I didn't crawl out of the bottle willingly. Someone had to pull me out. And it wasn't a grizzled veteran of life who did it — it was a scrawny Bible-college kid. His name

was Larry. He was studying to be a preacher at some school I'd never heard of, doing a summer internship.

He showed up on my doorstep early one morning. Had to be ten or eleven — which counted as “early” for me back then. I'd been out drinking the night before — same routine as always. My binges were legendary and terrifying. I went after alcohol the same way I went after football: Go big or go home. In the process, I attracted all the wrong people and chased away everyone who ever cared.

So what was this kid doing on my porch before the crack of noon?

I yanked the door open mostly because I was angry. I'd forgotten how bright the sun was in the daytime. The light stabbed my eyes like a pair of knitting needles. I recoiled, barely staying upright thanks to my grip on the doorknob. I must've been quite a sight: dirty pajama pants, a stained wife-beater t-shirt, bloodshot eyes, three days of beard, and hair that looked like I'd dragged it through a fryer.

“What do you want?” I growled, squinting through the glare.

“Hi... I'm Larry,” he squeaked. “I— I want to share some scriptures with you.”

I didn't know what baffled me more — what he said, or the fact that he was still standing there.

“I want to show you how you can have hope,” he said again, a little more firmly. “May I come in?”

To this day, I have no idea why I didn't scorch his eyebrows off with profanity and slam the door in his face. But I heard myself say:

“Sure.”

Next thing I knew, there I was at the ungodly hour of ten or eleven in the morning, sitting in my living room with a stranger — a stranger who definitely wasn't a half-drunk girl from the night before — while he opened a Bible in his lap to something he called the book of Romans.

“I'd like to show you something called the Romans Road,” he said.

I was living in a cheap apartment in Charleston then, not far from my parents' hardware store. I didn't know Charleston had a Romans Road. Sounded like something near The Battery.

“You want something to drink?” I asked. I was trying to be hospitable. No idea why.

“Oh... uh... I don't drink,” he said nervously.

“Don't you get thirsty?” I asked, grinning despite myself. What was he supposed to think? I reeked of yesterday's alcohol. “I mean a Coke or a bottle of water. Pretty sure I've got one of those in the fridge. Maybe both.”

“Oh. Okay. A Coke then.”

I limped into the kitchen. When my femur broke, it didn't just crack — it shattered. Doctors had used pins and bone grafts to save my leg. End result? My left leg ended up almost half an inch shorter than my right. Barefoot, you can see my left knee dip lower. To minimize the limp — and the hip and back pain — I wear an orthotic in my left shoe. Most days, no one notices. But barefoot and exhausted? It's obvious.

And since we're on the topic of life-changing football injuries, my throwing shoulder never healed right either. Surgeries, PT — none of it fixed it. I still can't raise my right arm above my head, let alone throw a spiral. Makes it difficult just to reach the back of the fridge. I muttered a curse as I

switched from my useless right hand to my left to grab the lone Coke hiding behind my collection of beers.

I brought it back to my unexpected guest and dropped into the chair across from him.

“Sorry. No glass — at least not a clean one. The maid only comes on Tuesdays.”

“It is Tuesday,” Larry observed.

He didn’t get the joke.

“Whatever...”

“That’s okay,” he said, smiling as he popped open the can. He looked around for a place to set it but found no tables — for good reason. Why own tables? They’re just obstacles you trip over when you stumble home drunk. Eventually he set the can on the floor after brushing away some empty bottles. He gave a sheepish smile — then launched into his Romans Road spiel.

I listened as he read and explained. I’d heard something like it before somewhere, but this time it clicked. I understood why he said he wanted to show me how I could have hope. Something in me knew he was right — or at least that I needed whatever he was offering.

He paused, then said gently, “I came here unexpected, and I knocked on your door. You didn’t have to answer, and you didn’t have to let me in — but here we are.” He gestured at the disaster around us. “You opened the door and let me in. Then I showed you from the Bible how Jesus wants you to trust Him — for salvation, and for hope.”

I don’t know how he guessed that hope was the word that hit hardest. But it did.

“Will you trust Him?” Larry asked quietly.

I stared at him for a long moment. It took a linebacker over three hundred pounds — with ten other guys helping — to take me down. And here was this kid, alone, armed with nothing but a Bible, offering to change my life.

That took guts — real guts.

When his question finally pushed through my hungover fog, I heard myself say, quietly but eagerly, “Yes.”

I wanted that hope. And that day, I asked Jesus to be my Savior. I used to make fun of people who talked like that — but on that day, I understood it.

And that same day, I poured every last drop of alcohol I owned down the drain. Even the mouthwash. Even the cold medicine. All of it.

That was two years, seven months, and eight days ago...

...and now I’d just thrown all of that away.

“You’re not drunk,” the voice said.

Those words grabbed me like a horse-collar tackle.