



# PAYING FOR COLLEGE

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Paying for College - The Novel  
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## Table of Contents

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Table of Contents .....	3
Chapter 1.....	4
Chapter 2.....	17
Chapter 3.....	36
Chapter 4.....	50
Chapter 5.....	62
Chapter 6.....	79
Chapter 7.....	95
Chapter 8.....	101
Chapter 9.....	119
Chapter 10.....	133
Chapter 11.....	143
Chapter 12.....	158
Chapter 13.....	169
Chapter 14.....	178
Chapter 15.....	186
Chapter 16.....	191
Chapter 17.....	205
Chapter 18.....	217
Chapter 19.....	224
Chapter 20.....	239
Epilogue.....	251

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## Chapter 1

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Oh brothers! How did I turn into a thief? I prowl around neighborhoods and businesses, scoping for telltale signs of a safe that sits within quiet walls, waiting for me to rob its contents of cash, valuable gems, and gold jewelry.

I'm not even sure how I became a burglar. One day, I did a quick job to pay my college tuition. Then I did another job, and another, until I had reached a point where I couldn't stop myself. Sometimes while sleeping, I even dream of cracking safes, where I jump up and down like a football player who scored another touchdown for the team win, as the safe's door opens slowly and reveals its booty inside.

Oh brothers, how did my life choices lead to this rotten dead-end? Could you point to any student who would run to the high school counselor's office and inquire how to become a thief. Of course, being a thief is one of the lowest of life forms such as the slime that grows around a toilet seat.

Once family and friends discover who you are, they stop answering your phone calls. They turn the other direction in the mall if they spot you from a distance. They even stop inviting you into their homes for the holidays or Sunday dinner, and somehow the invitation to the family BBQ is lost in the mail.

Brothers, I've always been willing to work and earn my way in this crazy world. I want to contribute to my community and help the unfortunate, but somehow I became the unfortunate one, as life's cruelty shoved me in this wrong direction. Life has a way of twirling, like a merry-go-round, taking a person on a dizzy ride for a while, then tossing the person to the other side.

Here I sit, brothers, on a hard wooden chair - the consummation of my life choices. The *cop-slops* accused me of breaking into a house and also of robbing the university

bursar, but I sat quiet as they stood over me with their physical threats. I just sat there, staring ahead at the gray brick wall, and kept my mouth shut.

One *cop-slop* looked like a nice guy with his kind brown eyes and warm smile, but he slapped me several times during the interrogation when I refused to answer his probing questions. Bastard! I felt a trickle of blood drip, drip, dripping from the corner of my lips, as I gagged from the strong bitter copper taste in my throat, but I just sat there, as if this illegal punishment didn't bother me. I refused to show these donut chasers any weakness.

He screamed, "You'll talk! We know you did it. Confess now." Then he slapped me on the back of the head jerking my head forward.

The other officer with his military crewcut and massive, chiseled muscles shoved a blank sheet of paper across the table with a pen lying diagonally on top. The other cop grabbed my hand, forced the pen into my hand, and squeezed my hand hard over the blank paper.

"Write!" he screamed. He put his other hand on the back of my head and pushed my tired head down to look at the paper.

I wrote: *Have a beautiful day!* Then I jabbed the paper with the pen to dot the period, dropped the pen, and looked away. I'm not innocent. I am as guilty as the hundreds of other criminals who sat on this wooden chair and took their beating, but my stubborn defiance refused to let the cops win, even if these two officers beat the living crap out of me. Perhaps I deserved this punishment, the price of making the wrong choices.

After an hour of intense interrogation, the large muscular cop kicked the back of the chair, and I went soaring in the air. My face skidded along the tiled floor as I came to a stop. Then both officers stood on each side of me,

picked me up, and dragged me to a dank cell. Approaching the cell door, they both flung me hard towards the cell door, bruising my face as it crashed against the heavy metal. A sharp pain shot up through my broken nose. As I fell, a river of blood poured onto the floor.

A metallic screech exploded from one ear to the other as the officers slammed the heavy metal door shut.

Brothers, I laid on the floor for a while. Perhaps thirty minutes. Perhaps thirty years. The blood, gushing from my nose, slowed to a trickle, then eventually stopped.

After an eternity, I scooted toward the metallic sink, grabbing the base with my tired, weak hands, and worked myself up to a standing position. I turned on the water with one hand, braced the sink with the other hand, so I wouldn't fall, and slowly washed the blood from my face and hands. Then I leaned against the cell wall and slid along it until I came to a concrete bench.

I gradually lowered myself on the bench and laid down on my back. The icy cold cell helped soothe the throbbing pain in my nose, cheeks, and other injured parts.

I don't know why, but I started laughing, and it reverberated back and forth across the walls, until it sounded as if a hundred criminals were in here with me, laughing at the same time.

Brothers, how did I become a damn burglar? I just wanted to attend college, get that degree, and somewhere in between, I would kill a few million brain cells at the frat parties and date a college girl or two. Then I could run to the abysmal job market and score that perfect job, where the doors of opportunity would swing open to a new life. I could turn around and slam the door of poverty that followed me around since I was born. No matter how hard I studied, no matter how hard I worked, I could never get

ahead. I was stuck in a gerbil cage running on the wheel that never went anywhere. Each time I made a couple of steps upward on the ladder of success, poverty would grab my feet and yank me down several rungs.

I remember the first day I saw the university. Mom dropped me off at the bus station early in the morning. I rode a crowded bus for six hours as it strode through the countryside and small towns of Michigan. As the bus had entered the city limits, a lightning bolt of excitement energized my body. The bus snaked through the main artery of campus, and I studied the monstrous buildings that spanned a whole block or two. I would spend the next four years running back and forth within this labyrinth of knowledge, as I walked along the extra wide sidewalks between the manicured lawns, trees, and bushes passing from one building to the next.

Then the campus faded from view as the bus drove through several blocks of spacious, two-story mansions with Greek letters.

Finally, the bus approached the downtown of this small, quaint, college town where nothing of significance happens unless the hapless hockey team accidentally makes the NCAA playoffs. No murders, no robberies, no serious felonies had marred this tiny town. Most people didn't bother to lock their doors or carry their jingling house keys, or at least until I arrived.

The bus's brakes started squealing while the bus shivered to a stop.

The bus driver turned and yelled, "Welcome to Marquette: the gateway to upper Michigan."

All the students stood up and grabbed their overstuffed backpacks, laptop cases, and handbags from the overhead baggage racks. I grabbed my things and withered into the

slowly moving line as the occupants made their way out of the bus. Once outside, I slung my backpack over my shoulder, pulled out the handle bar to the suitcase and rolled it behind me for the two miles to the dormitory.

I walked and walked and walked. As I passed the mansions of the fraternities and sororities, I pronounced every Greek letter in my mind. Over time, I will figure out which fraternity threw the best parties and which sorority had the sluttiest women, and who knows, maybe I would wake up the next morning in a strange bed.

I finally arrived at my dorm – Wentz Hall, a ten story, tan brick building. From one open dorm window, Ozzy Osbourne was blaring, while a group of male students leaned out from another open window and screamed at pedestrians passing by.

I walked into the lobby, checked in, fought my way onto the elevator, and hauled my stuff to my room.

As I walked in, a pile of clothes covered one bed while the other bed had a suitcase propped open with a mound of discarded wrappers from potato chips and candy bars.

“What the heck?” I muttered under my breath, as I rubbed my sweaty arm against the pile of clothes and pushed them off the side of the bed.

The bathroom door burst open and my roommate appeared, “What’re you doing?”

“I’m grabbing a bed.”

“But that’s my bed.”

“I don’t think so.” I pointed at the other bed, “Besides, you already marked your territory with your litter.”

“That’s my bed, too.”

“Really? Where am I supposed to sleep then if you take both beds?”

“That’s not my problem.”

"Look, I paid my room and board just like you did, so one of these beds belong to me." *Skiddy-cock, can't believe?*

I pushed the remaining clothes off the bed. Drew bent down, grabbed his clothes, and tossed them into the closet.

I placed my suitcase and backpack on the end of the bed, pulled out a corner of the bedsheet, and used it to wipe the sticky sweat from my forehead. I turned to face my roommate.

I nodded my head, "I clearly marked my territory. By the way, name is Jax."

My roommate grinned and squinted his eyes, "Yeah dude. I see. My name's Drew."

I looked around the room and noticed a stack of drawings on the desk. I walked to the desk and picked up the first chimerical drawing that had a man wearing a dark suit and fedora hat as he pointed a gun outward at whoever was looking at the drawing. The facial expression seemed so real, so angry while the gun seem to pierce outside the paper and into the real world.

"Put that down. Don't touch my stuff."

I dropped the drawing onto the stack, "Excuse me. I didn't mean to offend you."

"You'll ruin my drawings by contaminating the paper with the oils from your dirty hands."

"Come on. Cut me some slack. I didn't know."

"Just leave my stuff alone."

"No problem. Then you must grant me the same respect too."

Drew just shrugged his shoulders.

"If you have a problem with me, we can take it outside. I don't have to put up with your crap."

Drew looked downward and ran to the bathroom.

I didn't want a fight my first day in college, but knew that some men are Chihuahuas. They bark more than they bite.

I knew. I won the challenge.

Next, I went exploring the campus, like a puppy exploring a new home. I walked by every building, along every sidewalk, and every bush and tree. Once I knew the breadth and girth of my gerbil cage, I returned to the dorm.

I ran into my roommate again as he hunched over at the white laminated desk and sketched another graphic scene. I asked, "How's it going?"

Drew continued sketching as if he didn't hear me.

"You don't talk much, Captain America."

"Not much to say," as he looked up at me.

I didn't know it then, but I had met Drew on his bad day. I found the shredded rejection letter in a trashcan a week later in the bathroom. Another publishing company rejected his graphic novel.

I continued, "I hear ya. So you going to the Dean's welcoming party?"

"Yeah. Of course."

"Me too. The party starts at six. We should probably start heading there."

Drew scrutinized me, "Are you seriously going to wear a t-shirt, blue jeans, and tennis shoes?"

"Yes, of course. You don't agree with my choice of attire."

"I heard the Dean's very strict."

"Oh come on."

"I'm serious. Well anyway, just give me a minute."

Drew went to the bathroom and returned several minutes later wearing a white dress shirt, blue dress pants, and a red tie. Then he slipped on black polished dress shoes.

Sure enough. We arrived at the freshman reception party. And brothers, no one wore a t-shirt and blue jeans except for me. All the men wore polo shirts and slacks or dress shirts and ties. Half the women copied the men and wore the same attire while other women wore skirts and dresses and showed off their smooth, youthful legs.

Then I saw her standing behind a table with her long blond hair as she handed students their nametags. She placed her cell phone on the table, and the Beatles sang, "Hey, Jude."

Drew nudged me, "Who's that?"

"I have no idea. But she deserves a closer scrutiny."

"Oh brothers," I thought, as I approached, my eyes lusting after her body as I studied her exquisite hourglass shape. *Oh koi no yokan*. I could tear off her clothes and toss her onto that table, and ravage her body, but I'm no savage. The ability of man to suppress and delay his primal urges is what separates man from the beasts.

I fandangoed towards the table and mustered one courageous word that would change the fate of mankind, "Hello."

She turned to look at me. "Hi."

Then I looked into her blue eyes.

"Name," she asked.

"Name?" I repeated.

"You have a name don't you?"

"Of course I do. Just call me Jax."

"I need your last name too."

"Jax, Jax Thompson."

Then her naughty fingers glided over the name badges until they stopped at my badge.

"Here you go," as she picked it up and handed it to me.

"Thank you."

I turned to go, but I turned and looked at her again. Then I glanced at her cerulean eyes that were as real as the blonde streaks in her hair. Of course, it was a quick glance, so she would never notice. “You have me at a disadvantage. You know my name, but I didn’t catch yours.”

She smiled and looked at me, and her eyes twinkled a little naughtiness.

“Very well then. I’ll just call you the mysterious nametag girl.”

“Maybe I never gave you my name.”

“Very well then. Then how should I address you?”

“Phaedra.”

“Nice to meet you, Phaedra.” Then I reached across the table to shake her hand. “Perhaps we’ll bump into each other in class.”

“Nice to meet you too, but I don’t think we’ll see each other around.”

“Really? Aren’t we both students?”

“I’m pre-law, unless you’re planning to switch majors.”

“I don’t think that’ll happen. I’m Mr. Business all the way. Once I finish college, I’ll become the CEO of my own company, as I help people invest their money and plan for their financial future.”

“Ambitious, aren’t you?”

“Perhaps, a bit, but I’m the guy who never wastes any opportunities. I make a plan and then follow through with it.”

I switched the spotlight from me to her. “May I ask: if you’re not a business major, what are you doing here?”

“I’m helping my father.”

“Father?”

She pointed at a large man whom I thought looked like Sasquatch wearing a blue pin-stripe suit with half his fur shaved off.

"Who's he?"

"Father."

"I got that part, but what's his role here at the university?"

"He's the Dean."

"Oh."

"Yeah. Will you still talk to me?"

I studied Phaedra's father, and then I turned to face Phaedra again. No way did Phaedra come from his loins. I would need a DNA test that a thousand scientists authenticated. Of course, I stopped myself from asking whether she was adopted, because I would offend her. Perhaps the Dean adopted her, or the mailman entertained the misses while the Dean was busy at work.

I replied, "Of course. It would take a hundred bigfoots to stop me from talking to you."

Then someone tapped me on the shoulder. "You're taking all day, bro?"

I turned and looked behind me and saw a squad of surfer nerds with reddish angry faces.

Then I faced Phaedra again, "Well, I gotta go. It looks like I'm holding up the line."

"Bye."

"Bye."

Drew caught up with me, "Nice, bro."

"What do you mean?"

"I saw your little conversation with the nametag girl."

"Oh, that's the Dean's daughter."

"Oh, you live dangerously."

"Of course. What's the point of living if life never throws any challenges in one's way?"

We walked to the refreshment table and grabbed some macadamia-nut cookies and plastic cups of Kool-Aid embellished with a lemon wedge and bobbing apple pieces.

I stood there and ate my cookie. I caught Phaedra's naughty eyes checking me out from time to time, as I drank that Kool-Aid as if I was drinking the swankiest wine. I felt a rush of kilig sweep over me as I snuck glances in Phaedra's direction.

Drew glanced at Phaedra a couple of times.

"Are you enjoying the Kool-Aid?" I asked.

"The Kool-Aid is a little too sweet."

"The Kool-Aid is alright." I lied but nobody likes a complainer, "I see the university does not hesitate to splurge on refreshments."

I saw several students standing around the Dean. I placed that exquisite Kool-Aid on the table and looked at Drew, "Here's my opportunity to make a first good impression."

"Good luck."

I approached the Dean and stretched my right hand out for a handshake. "Good afternoon, sir."

The Dean just stared at my hand as if I were dangling a slimy snake at him.

Brothers, what could I do? I had done nothing to bring this rudeness upon myself. I said, "That's okay. You probably should not shake my hand. I'm not even sure I washed my hands after doing my little business a little while ago."

The Dean scanned the faces around him and stared coldly at me. Then he said, "Good day, gentlemen," and walked away.

The other students stared at me. Who could blame them? My interruption ended their ass kissing prematurely. So I pronounced every syllable clearly in a pompous manner, "Good day gentlemen." Then I walked away as if I had a large tree limb wedged up my ass and sauntered over to Drew, who was laughing his ass off.

As I approached, Drew said, "Nice one."

"So much for a first great impression."

Drew and I headed to the front row of folding chairs that formed a grid spread across the lawn. I wanted to sit dead center because I know these educated types can't get enough of themselves to hear themselves speak.

The stentorian Sasquatch walked up the temporary stage and approached the wooden podium. He adjusted his red silk tie and began his monotonous discourse.

"Welcome freshmen to Northern Mackinaw University. The time you will spend here will..."

From his sniffy eloquence, I knew the Dean could speak for centuries standing behind that mike. Blah. Blah. Blah, until the audience was ready to guzzle down poisonous Kool-Aid or slit their wrists to numb the pain in their ears.

I started yawning and stretched out my hands and feet. Oh brothers, I stretched out my hands and feet so wide as if I were reaching for the sky.

Drew moved several seats down to distant himself from me.

Then I stood up and stretched my hands one last time and yawned so loudly, students from the other side of campus probably could hear me.

The Dean paused and stared at me. I turned and glanced at the audience as a hundred eyeballs gazed at me. Some students smiled but they lack the courage to join my crusade.

"Oh, sorry chaps. Please carry on." Then I walked away with that imaginary tree limb stuck in my butt again.

One sour handshake and a little coarse rudeness on both sides could doom a budding relationship, but serendipity always sends travelers on a reckless path with many twists and turns. One chance greeting with a *poppin-licious* woman and the repugnance of her rude, pompous father would

send me down the wrong path. If I never had met this woman, my life would have turned for the better, but brothers, this woman drew me in. I could not stay away from her and her charming father.

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## Chapter 2

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Damn brothers, I'm not even at the university a whole week, and I hold the first tuition bill in my sweaty hands. The university graciously granted me a week to pay the first installment on my account. Just one week.

I headed to my favorite office at the whole university – the financial aid office. God, those bureaucrats are so kind and helpful with the best customer service in the state. Just kidding. That's definitely the wrong office. Those bastards reduced my entire life to a collection of inhumane digits stored in a computer system. Then I heard one story about one financial aid officer in particular – the dreaded dragon lady, who relished in dishing out bad news to unsuspecting students.

I arrived to the office five minutes early and sat in a hard plastic chair and waited for twenty years. Of course, we were destined to meet. The dragon lady was the only one of the whole staff who became available. As I walked into the office, "Hello. How are you?" in my chirpiest voice. Then I placed the letter on her desk.

She just stared at it. Then she swiveled in her chair to face the computer screen.

"Student number?"

"I guess we'll dispense with the pleasantries and get right down to business. Eight seven eight. Three five six.

Her pointed fingers tapped the numbers on the keyboard.

I sat in the chair and scooted closer to her desk. Then I gazed at her while she stared at the computer screen. The fluorescent lights really brought out the shine from the polyester fibers of her suit. She would shoot off a question every ten seconds – income? Parents' income? Bank deposit accounts? Undisclosed income?

I studied her degrees hanging on the wall – an associate’s in hotel hospitality. A bachelor’s in liberal arts.

She swiveled in her chair to look at me. “Then everything is correct. You owe the university six-hundred and sixty dollars.”

“I know that, ma’am. But I don’t have six-hundred and sixty dollars.”

“Then call your parents.”

“My parents don’t have that kind of money at this moment.”

“Then ask your friend.”

“My friends are broke just like me.”

“Then you have a problem.”

“Couldn’t the university wait until the next disbursement of financial aid?”

“We cannot do that. A student must pay his account in full before the next disbursement of financial aid. Besides, your financial aid does not cover all your expenses. You will still be short.”

“Okay, I see. Then let’s examine the worst case scenario. What happens if I don’t pay by the due date?”

“The university will drop your classes. Then you will have to start over again next semester.”

I felt I swallowed a large boulder down my throat. I thought she would bite me because she pulled her hair back so tightly, it pulled her cheeks back to reveal her fangs. “I was afraid you would say something like that. Thank you for your time.” *Oh poonga such as she.* I rose, approached the door, turned, and added, “Have a nice day.”

The dragon lady turned and grabbed a folder. Then she swiveled to her computer terminal and began keying in information. I shook my head back and forth. I watered house plants with a more charming personality than hers.

I walked to the dorm as a drizzle fell. Boy, I really picked a kind and gentle university. If I'm just a little short on the bill, they'll graciously give me some time off. That way, I can work and ensure I have plenty of money for the next time. What's wrong with America when \$660 stops the education of a young bright lad. Just \$660! A meager sum. I'm not asking much, but that twenty thousand per year in tuition costs a fortune. At those prices, I should demand the university provide me a maître d' to carry my books to class and carry my food tray to my table in the cafeteria.

Walking to the dorm, I know where the university doesn't spend that money - cafeteria food. The state would incarcerate me for a hundred years if I fed homeless dogs and cats that slimy slop. But damn, that meager \$660 erected a massive roadblock to my future - sorry sir, your future is closed. The economy has plenty of jobs, but they pay no benefits, give no respect, offer no future.

I thought and thought.

I picked up the phone and called mom.

After three rings, "Hello?"

"Hi, mom."

"Jax? Hi Jax. I'm glad you called. How's college?"

"Everything's fine mom. College is great."

"Have you made any new friends? Did ya meet anyone special?"

"C'mon mom. I have no time for girls. But I met some great guys at the dorm."

"You're not drinking too much, are you?"

"Mom. Of course not. The university imposes a strict no drinking policy. The RA babysits us."

"RA? What's an RA?"

"Resident advisor. He follows us around, making sure we're not drinking or damaging property or subjecting the university to costly lawsuits."

“That’s good. Just sometimes, I worry about you.”

“I know mom but don’t worry. I can take care of myself. Can I speak with dad?”

“Well son, dad’s in his room sleeping. I don’t want to disturb him.”

How’s he doing?”

“I think he’s, he’s getting better. The doctor said one more treatment.”

But I heard the tone in her voice. Even though I could not see her tears, I heard she mopped her cheeks with a tissue and blew her nose.

“That’s great, mom. Tell dad I hope he’s getting better. Then you and dad can come and visit me in college.”

“We will. We also want to see where all that money is going. Are you doing all right with your financial aid? We know college is expensive.”

“No way. I already told you. I qualify for financial aid. I have proof the government is not wasting your tax dollars.”

“Jax. Be serious with me.”

“I am, mom. I told you, don’t worry about me. God loves us. For some reason, we always make due.”

“Alright, but if you get into trouble, you can always come home. Maybe you can get your summer job back.”

“Mom, c’mon. Would you like fries with your order?”

“But it’s an honest living.”

“I know that. That’s what I’m afraid of. I had better go before you mail me a job application. Besides, I have class in thirty minutes.”

“Jax, I’m serious.”

“I know. I must go, mom. Bye.”

“Bye.”

Brothers, I’m not sure why I called home. I felt more depressed than ever as if acid rain fell inside my head and dissolved my thoughts. Perhaps some part of me wished

dad were getting better. I knew the ravenous cancer was eating his insides. Perhaps I called home because I hoped mom would scream into the phone that she finally bought that winning lottery ticket and won the lottery. Then the whole family could live on Leisure Street – no more distress over unpaid bills and threatened legal action. Then I could hang out with the rich pukes on campus, drive a fancy car, and say farewell to those bureaucrats in the financial aid office. I would never have to see those bastards again. Of course, I could mail those bastards a postcard from Mexico during Christmas break.

Of course, I wanted to talk to my dad, but he stopped speaking to everyone a long time ago. He just stays in the spare bedroom all day behind a locked door as the blare of a TV filters around the edges of the door.

Every week, mom buys a box of Snickers bars, my dad's favorite. So after supper, I would place a Snickers outside his door. Then the next morning as I made the morning ritual to the bathroom, I would check to see if the bar was gone. Since I moved to college, mom took over my Snickers duty.

I went to class so I wouldn't have to stay in this quiet room, but I didn't feel better. Finally, Saturday night came. I dug out my old clothes from the bottom of the drawer, which were half the clothes in my wardrobe. I usually wore these clothes when lying around on a Saturday with nothing to do or I had physical chores around the house like cleaning the leaves from the eaves or mowing the grass. I smiled as I pulled these ancient rags from the drawer.

My roommate, Drew, hunched over at the desk sketching a new drawing looked up at me, "Hey man. Where're you going? Did you find a party? I could use a drink."

"No way. I just need to walk around for a while. I'm just getting some exercise to help clear my head."

“If you find a party, let me know.”

“No problem. You’ll be the first person I call.”

Drew returned to sketching.

I glanced over his shoulder and saw his pencil strokes bring to life a gothic castle with a stormy background.

“That’s really good.”

“Thanks.”

I went to the bathroom and changed. Then I slipped out the door. Several hours later, I found myself walking along Lincoln Way West, the busy thoroughfare in town as a cold autumn rain began falling. Then I turned on a side street and spotted Mike’s garage.

I looked around in every direction. I even studied the trees, just in case a police officer sat on a branch and waited for a drunk student to climb a tree. Satisfied no one was looking or driving in my direction, I jogged to the dark brick building across the street surrounded by dark orange barberry bushes. I ducked behind a large bush that grew in a corner of the building.

So here I am, crouching behind a large bush. It’s only September, but damn, it’s freezing. Although I sat under the eaves of the building, the raindrops marched down the bushes’ leaves and dripped onto me. The rain invaded large spots on my jacket and broke through underneath in several places.

I keep shivering. Damn, it’s cold, while my teeth clattered like an old mechanical typewriter.

I looked at my watch – almost 10 o’clock. Then I gazed across the street at Mike’s Garage. Loud activity filled the garage as fluorescent lights lit the parking lot. Mechanics were still fixing the last car.

What in the hell am I doing here? Am I this desperate? That’s crazy? I committed no serious crime yet, so I could get up and head home as a free man. Then I could return home

and beg for my old fast-food job. I would start out as a burger engineer and French fry technician. Not everyone in town can make an awesome burger and put the right crispiness on the French fries. You never know. Maybe, I could be a crew manager in five years and restaurant manager in ten. But then the embarrassment, the humiliation, when a high school classmate heads to the burger shack to squelch that midnight hunger. Then they would spot me working at a fast food joint as they pointed their fat fingers at me and jeered in their squeaky voices, 'Hey, look at the top student in business. He became a loser!'

I can hear their hurtful questions, their humiliating scorn - what happened to you, man? I thought you would head to college?

Rage and anger kept me glued to this spot. I mumbled, "I don't want to be a loser. I'll show them. I'll finish college. I have higher aspirations than a career in the fast food industry."

I reached into my pocket and pulled out my lucky skeleton key. As long as I possess this key, I can enter any place with luck on my side. I traced the key's outline, following the clover end, following each leaf. Then my finger followed the shaft and felt the triangular teeth of the bit.

Brothers, I remember when I found that key when I was little rascal with no care of the adult world...

I was playing in a shaded park on a wooden playset, which was a tangle of wooden platforms, stairs, chain linked bridges, and slides. Tall, monstrous oak trees grew around the playground, keeping it cool from the sun's piercing summer rays.

I raced up the wooden steps to the first level. Then up the second staircase to the second level, as I speeded past the

slower kids to the top. Then I hopped on the slide and went down, around a curve, and then to the bottom, screaming, “Weeeeeeeee,” until I landed on my feet.

I heard my mom’s voice, “Jax. Not so fast!”

But I paid no attention. Kicking up wood chips, I ran across playground to the swings and hopped on a swing. I swung back and far as far as I could. I even tried to complete the elusive 360 degrees around the swing’s bars. After a while, I coasted on the swing, letting my human pendulum slow to a crawl.

Before the swing stopped swinging, I jumped and kicked up a cloud of wood chips.

I smiled as I looked down at the two cavities I created with my feet. I sank at least six inches into the ground. As I hopped out of the hole, I marveled at my masterpiece.

Then I spotted it – an ancient cast iron skeleton key resting at the bottom of the cavity. I grabbed it and traced the key’s edge with my finger.

“Give it back.”

I looked up and saw Timmy, the school bully. “No,” I yelled.

Timmy held out an open right hand, “I said it give back. Now.”

“Finder keepers, losers –”

Timmy pushed me.

I wrapped my fingers around the key and pushed Timmy backed.

Timmy punched me on the cheek, “Oh yeah. I’ll show you.”

I threw a punch, but Timmy turned and the punch brushed off his shoulder. I followed with a kick to the shin. I thought I had missed, but Timmy screamed, “Ouch.”

Then Timmy grabbed me, and we both fell to the ground. I gripped the key tighter and tucked that hand closer to me while I grabbed his shoulder with my free hand.

We turned and rolled on the playground as we embraced each other.

Then our mothers screamed, "Jax" and "Timmy," as they ran to our spot.

On the last roll, I broke free and shot up on my feet.

Timmy followed, but our protective mothers surrounded us and stood between us.

"Jax, what's gotten into you?" My mother yelled as she looked down at me.

"Timmy, I'll tell your father. You come home right now."

The fight was over. I brushed off the dust.

Timmy and his mother walked away. When Timmy was ten feet away, he turned, "See ya in school."

I shook my fist at him, "Anytime, Timmy. Anytime." Then I used my other hand to dangle the key, displaying my prize.

My mom asked, "What's that about, Jax?"

I turned and showed her the anachronistic skeleton key.

My mom grabbed the key by the clover end, held it to her eye level, and studied it. "Where'd you get this?"

"I found it." Then I pointed to the cavity I had made with my feet.

"This must be a magical key. It'll open any door." Then she returned the key, and I deposited it into my pocket...

I came out of my daydream as a mechanic dropped a wrench - CLANNKKK! I gripped my magical talisman tighter. So brothers, everywhere I go, I take my good luck talisman. As long as I have this key, nothing bad can happen to me. I slid the talisman into my pocket.

I crouched behind the bush, shivering. Perhaps some of the shivering came from my nervousness as I contemplated the act of my first serious felony. Mists of steam rose from my warm body as my body's heat tried to stop the invasion of the freezing raindrops.

An autumn breeze pushed its way through the bushes, and my teeth began clattering louder. Then I scanned the area and searched for a better spot. However, this place offered the best view of Mike's Garage and the main road.

I was surprised this street saw little traffic. I counted three cars and one truck pass by within the last hour. Just a couple of streets over, bumper to bumper traffic filled the streets every weekend as drunk college students cruised the streets like Pakistani suicide bombers searching for friends, beer parties, and hot cheap dates.

My legs started to fall asleep, so I stood up and leaned against the cold brick wall. I stomped my feet up and down to shake off the leg tingles. I stayed hidden behind the bush as I peered from the side.

I know my best friend Brian worked in a small garage for two years. He said the weekends were the busiest because people couldn't afford to miss work. Thus, they waited until the weekends to fix their cars. Then I researched Mike's Garage on the internet. Brothers, I have never seen so many complaints. Pages and pages came up: *how can these sleazy scumbags ripped off everyone in town and still be in business?* After I had browsed the first ten complaints, they shared a common theme – the mechanics always found more problems and always charged double than their estimates.

I know my friend hated his job and his boss. He said that every time he turned around, he argued with his boss for an unpaid commission or forgotten work. Then one day, my friend brought a new customer to the shop. This customer started a car-rental business and wanted ten sunroofs

installed along with some detailing. My friend was ecstatic and smiled about his anticipated large bonus until the boss said, "Do you know how much money that is? We need to talk about your commission." My friend turned red and stormed out of the boss's office. Approaching the door, my friend turned around and gave the manager a one-finger salute. The manager yelled several times, "Let's talk about this." As my friend walked through the garage, he pushed over his bright red Mac toolbox and spilled wrenches and tools across the floor.

I studied Mike's Garage and smiled. I couldn't have asked for a better location. I laughed at the seven-foot high chain link fence that I could scale over within seconds and hide in the shadows under the massive oak trees that surrounded the business.

I jumped as a car fired to life and backfired several times. Then one of the mechanics drove a red 1996 Toyota out of the garage. The car turned and drove through the gate to the parking lot behind Mike's Garage.

The chirping sounds of the night returned as the mechanic turned off the car. Then a tall man with a beard exited the car and approached the gate. I even heard a loud click as the man snapped a padlock closed to lock the gate. As the man walked under one of the overhead lights, I was surprised to see him wear an exceptionally clean white t-shirt and faded blue jeans devoid of any grease and oil stains.

The bearded man walked to the front of the garage and approached an old restored Buick. He waved good-bye to someone inside and said, "See ya later, Chad." Then he climbed into the Buick.

The Buick's engine roared into life. As the mechanic stomped on the gas pedal a couple of times, the V8 engine

roared and spewed out smoke from the exhaust. The mechanic put the car into gear and drove away.

I remained standing in the bushes, waiting, and waiting, and waiting. Although I couldn't see Chad, I knew this was good news. I knew from my internet research, Mike owned the garage, but he let his son, Chad, manage it. Many complaints said Mike charged reasonable prices, and his mechanics did good work until his son took over. Mike moved to Mexico to repair boat engines, and, of course, I'm sure he is suffering down there and misses the minus ten degree Michigan winters and the freezing mornings to shovel the new snow covering the sidewalks and driveways and chisel the ice from the car windows.

The lights clicked off while the garage become dark. Then Chad walked out of the garage and slammed the heavy garage doors down, one by one. As he pulled each door down, the rollers rumbled until the door slammed into the ground like a thunderclap.

Chad padlocked each garage door. Then he walked to his truck, a Ford f-150, parked next one of the garage doors. I noticed he was a tall, muscular man with rugged good looks. I'm surprised I didn't see any complaints of all the hearts he probably has broken in town.

I stood behind the bushes for an extra 30 minutes and didn't seen any cars. The front of Mike's Garage remained quiet except for the crickets singing their cacophonous, mating songs.

I looked at my watch and remained in the bushes for another 15 minutes, just in case Chad or the mechanic rushed back to the garage if they forgot something.

I kept looking at my watch. The hands took an eternity to show 11 o'clock. I walked out of the bushes and stretched my hands and legs a little to shake off the sleepiness.

Then I walked across the street to Mike's Garage and sauntered to the chain-linked gate. As I approached the gate, I pulled the knitted gloves out of my jacket pocket and slid them onto my cold hands.

At the gate, I turned and scanned the barren streets. No one was around. I scampered over the fence. The freezing metal bit through my gloves.

Then I heard the rising voices of two men arguing. I tucked myself into a dark corner where the fence joined the building of Mike's Garage under the shadows of the massive oak trees that grew behind the building. I also slid my hands into my jacket pocket to warm them.

As the two men walked by on the street in front of Mike's Garage, one of them stumbled to the ground while his beer bottle slipped from his hand and hit the curb with a clink.

"You okay?" as his friend leaned over to help his friend up.

"Dammit, I dropped my beer."

"Don't worry. We're almost there." Then they walked away.

I watched them turn at the corner that went directly to downtown. They must be walking to the Mad Murphy's, a popular Irish bar for the locals. I whispered to the chirping crickets around me, "Well guys, if I succeed tonight, I'll buy you guys a round."

After the streets became quiet again, I scanned the area for cars and pedestrians. Then I crouched low and walked along the outside wall until I reached the back. I ducked behind that old Toyota and scanned the area for strangers again. Although I consider myself a friendly person, I wasn't in a mood to make any new friends tonight. Then I frowned and mumbled, "Shit," as I looked at the back of the building with no windows.

I crouched low and returned to the building's side near where I climbed the fence and approached the first window. I pushed up, but the window remained in place. I pushed on the bottom part of the window with six panes. The bottom middle pane moaned and groaned, but it resisted my efforts. Then I pushed harder. My hands burst through the window while I banged my head on the outside window frame. The windowpane crashed to the ground and broke into large shards.

I ran to the back of Mike's Garage and hid behind the Toyota again, waiting ten minutes. Occasionally, I rubbed my sore forehead with my gloved hand. Brothers, I waited a little longer and didn't hear a peep, so I returned to the broken window, reached inside and released the window's latch and pushed the window up.

I turned to scan the area again. Seeing no cars, no people, no semblance of any hassles, I crawled through the window and into the garage.

I stood a moment to let my eyes adjust to the darkness. I also scanned the garage for blinking lights just in case a burglar alarm or CCTV was monitoring my movements.

I meandered to the back of the garage to Chad's Office. I opened the office door with no problems.

I walked around the old, worn out metal desk and pulled out the bottom drawer. I retrieved my cell phone and turned on the function for a flashlight. As I removed each item from the drawer, I passed it under the flashlight. Then I tossed the items onto a growing stack of documents on the floor. I pulled out the middle drawer. Same crap – more documents and car manuals. Finally, I pulled out the top middle drawer with a bunch of pencils, paper clips, a stapler, and other office junk. I slammed that drawer shut.

I leaned back against the wall and studied the desk.

Finally, an idea struck me. Sometimes, as a teenager, I would tape forbidden things to the bottom of the drawer to hide stuff from my parents like a worn issue of Playboy or hid forbidden books behind the drawer.

I pulled out each drawer and turned them upside down - nothing. I mumbled, "Shit."

I was ready to leave when a glare from inside the desk caught my eye. I pointed the flashlight into the dark recess of the old desk. Oh brothers, I found my treasure. I whispered, "Oh, that's where you've been hiding you little rascal." I pulled out an old metal lock box covered with dirt and grease but the front latch shined like chrome.

I carried the box out of the office and approached one of the large red toolboxes along the back wall of the garage. I pulled out the large bottom drawer and saw several crowbars lying in a stack. I grabbed one and went to work on my treasure.

I wedged the box between my right hand and body and shoved the crowbar into the lips between the lid and box. I applied a little force on the crowbar while the box screeched and moaned. Then the box popped open. Then I dropped the crowbar and dumped the box upside on a workbench.

I closed my eyes and made a cross over my heart. Then I lifted the box to reveal its contents.

Oh brothers. I have not seen so much money in my life.

I spread the bills across the table. Then I pulled out the checks and credit card receipts and dropped them to the floor. No way would I cash these.

Then I stacked all the bills and tucked them into my front jean's pocket. Then I held my opened hand on the edge of the table and used my right hand to scoop the coins into my hand. Although the gloves made it difficult, I fed the coins to my other jean's pocket. Several coins fell to the floor with a ting but I just left them there. Too much of a bother.

I thought I found the cash box but who knows what other goodies remained in the garage. I went to every drawer in the garage, emptied the drawer's contents on the floor while checking the contents with my flashlight. Someone filled one drawer with magazines of naked guys doing unspeakable things. I shook my head back and forth. I guess manly mechanics love real men. Yuck!

I returned to the office and searched through all the filing cabinets. Then I found an old coffee can with a slit cut in the plastic top stuffed with small crumpled bills and coins. I emptied the can onto the desk and stuffed the bills and coins into my jeans' pocket.

Bright headlights danced across the front windows of Mike's Garage.

I ducked behind the desk.

Mike's Garage went dark again.

I made my way to the broken window and peered outside, where I spotted an old white Honda Civic parked on the edge of the parking lot of Mike's Garage.

Two people sat in the front seat with the engine switched off. Fog started forming on the windows while the occupants moved closer.

I ducked down and sat with my back against the wall. "You've gotta be kidding me."

Perhaps I should just walk up to the car, knock on the driver's window, and scream, "Get a room," as I hand him fifty bucks.

After fifteen minutes, the driver started the Honda Civic and drove away. I waited another five minutes. Then I crawled out. Luck stood behind me cheering me on. Although the rain stopped an hour ago, a thick fog swallowed the landscape.

I ran to the fence and climbed up fast. Then I ran to the intersection.

I turned left and sauntered to downtown. I made it! I pulled my gloves off and stuffed them into my jacket pocket. Once I made it two blocks away, I felt this high, this euphoria that energized my mind and body. I felt I had enough energy to run faster than any Olympic sprinter.

Then the thinking gears started turning in the back of my mind. I knew police could use a K9 dog to track my scent, possibly even after the autumn rain cleansed everything. I walked the four blocks to Mad Murphy's, and thought with all the sweat, odors, and skanks pouring out the bar, the poor dog would become confused and lose my scent. Plus, I needed a beer. No way would I be sleeping with all that adrenaline racing through my veins.

Approaching the bar, I heard some country western song blaring about how his girl had left him for another guy.

Walking through the door, I spotted an empty bar stool at the far end of the bar. I plopped onto the wooden stool.

A cute little thing wearing tight jeans, cowboy boots and a baseball cap put on backwards approached me, "What'd have, hon?"

"A Budweiser, on tap, please."

As she turned, I read the back of her black t-shirt - 15<sup>th</sup> Annual Karate Tournament. Well I guess I won't be hitting on her tonight. She'll definitely can hit back.

A minute later, a frosty glass of suds appeared before me while foam continued spilling over the sides. Being a beer connoisseur and not letting anything go to waste, I grabbed that icy-cold beer and gulped it as the taste of heaven hit my parched taste buds.

"Five-fifty."

"Oh yeah. Just a second." I pulled out a handful of coins and dumped them onto the counter. I counted the coins while she raised her eyebrows several times.

“Did ya rob your brother’s piggy bank?”

“No. Of course not. I stole my roommate’s laundry money. I didn’t think he needed it since he stopped showering a month ago anyway.”

She frowned as she grabbed the coins and walked away.

Then I looked at the mirror that spanned across the whole back wall behind the bar with glass shelves holding numerous liquor bottles.

I spotted the mechanic of Mike’s Garage standing near the pool tables holding a cue stick in one hand and a Budweiser in the other. Then I turned and studied him some more.

A man, with whom the mechanic was playing, tossed a twenty onto the pool table and walked away shaking his head.

I approached the pool table. “Can I jump in and play?”

“It’ll cost you twenty.”

“Twenty it is.”

I inserted the quarters into the pool table and racked the balls in the triangle and stood back.

The mechanic hit the cue ball so hard, it crashed against the other balls. The balls started moving and bouncing off the bumpers of the pool table. Finally, three balls dropped into the holes.

After the mechanic had made another two balls in, I said, “My name’s Jax.”

He nodded his head slightly.

I hunched over and hit the cue ball with the stick. The ball I aimed for veered off course and never came close to the corner hole.

I gulped my beer.

Then the mechanic made another two balls.

My next turn, I almost made a ball in, but the ball bounced off the corner pocket.

After another round, that eight ball was lurking near a side pocket. The mechanic tapped that side pocket with his cue stick and struck the cue ball ever so slightly. The cue ball moved slowly and kissed the eight ball just a little and the eight ball rolled slowly to the middle hole and dropped in.

“Damn.”

“That’ll be twenty.”

I placed that twenty on the table.

“Do ya wanna play another game?”

“No way. I don’t want you taking all my hard earned money.”

“Alright then. Next,” the mechanic screamed.

I finished my beer. I approached the bar to get another beer. Of course, I think the bartender is warming up to me. Perhaps she borrowed that karate t-shirt from a friend. After several more frowns, she’ll give up her phone number.

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## Chapter 3

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Brothers, I woke at seven thirty in the morning with a stomachache that felt so terrible, I felt shards of glass were sliding and sloshing through my innards. I jumped out of bed and ran to the bathroom to regurgitate.

I remembered I drank only two beers last night, but I felt like crap while a dark haze buried my thoughts and memories. After several more heaves, I felt better. I felt a breeze blow through my mind and lift that fog and the events of last night rushed into my mind. Damn, I broke into Mike's garage last night. *How crazy aktashite am I?* My first serious felony. My other transgressions paled in comparison, like the time I stole my cousin's remote-control car, or I snuck a twenty out of my mom's purse, so I could meet my friends at the mall.

I rubbed my tired face with my hands and mumbled, "Just this one time. Just this one little discretion." I looked at myself in the mirror. I can't return home and take that dead-end job, in a dead-end town with a dead-end future. I want to be somebody - somebody with a college degree.

I opened the bathroom door slowly, tiptoed to the room, and grabbed my jeans lying on the floor. I returned to the bathroom and locked the door.

I covered the sink with a bath towel and dumped the contents of my pockets into the sink. My black skeleton key landed on top of the money pile.

Part of me wished I had only dreamed of breaking into Mike's garage, but right here, the proof was lying in the middle of the towel in the sink. I counted \$1,225 in bills with \$1.75 in change. I raised my eyebrow. One part of my mind was amazed to see some serious cash. Brothers, it would have taken two-hundred hours of back breaking work at the fast food restaurant to earn that kind of money. Then somewhere from the deep depths of my mind, my

subconscious screamed, Jax, you're wrong. Return this money. This money does not belong to you.

I shook my head. Then I returned the money to my jeans and returned to the room. I studied my sleeping roommate as a rhythmic *zzzzZZZZ* came from his mouth while his chest rose and fell.

I pulled out my dirtiest underwear from my laundry bag and wrapped a thousand dollars in it and pushed it to the bottom of the laundry bag.

I knew my roommate was crazy and would do almost anything, but I thought he would leave my dirty underwear alone, or at least I hoped he would. But who knows what this guy does when I'm not around. I don't want to even think about it.

I showered and dressed and headed out. My stomach grumbled, so I headed to the empty cafeteria to grab a plate of food. Most students slept in as they recovered from a binge night of drinking and partying.

I looked at the same selection of food that the cafeteria served every day at the buffet counter – stacks of toasted white bread, scrambled eggs, hash browns, bacon, and sausage. I grabbed a little of everything and sat down at an empty dining room table.

I tired of the same food selection and decided to experiment and mix up my routine a little. I dumped ketchup onto one slice of bread and dabbed a thick lather of mayonnaise on the other. Then I scrapped my scrambled eggs, bacon, sausage, and hash browns on one slice and folded the slices closed. I knew the ketchup and mayonnaise would glue everything together. Plus, the food tasted a little better, a little more palatable.

I returned to my dorm room and grabbed the clothes I wore last night and threw them into a disposable plastic bag.

I heard the bed springs rattle as my sleeping roommate turned his face towards the wall.

I walked to the dormitories on the other side of campus. Then I walked behind the large building and approached the row of dumpsters in back surrounded by a wooden fence. I looked left and then right. No one was around. I lifted the dumpster lid and tossed my bag of old clothes into the trash and walked away.

I was bored and walked around campus for a while through the familiar halls in the business building, where every day I attend a lecture or two.

Oh brothers, my stomach started twisting and squeezing. Then I hiccupped something foul. I tried to cover my mouth with my hand, but I couldn't. I dropped to my knees and right before me, my stomach contents blew out while an atomic spew of half-digested breakfast spread across the floor. I don't know whether it was fate or destiny, but I looked up and read the nameplate on the door – Dean Tremaine. Hhhmmm, I thought. What are the odds that's the same Dean with whom we shared a budding relationship?

I rose and ran to the bathroom and scrubbed my mouth and hands under running water in a sink. Then I rinsed my mouth by slurping water from my cupped hands.

I felt a little better, and walked out the back doors of the business building. I avoided walking past Dean Tremaine's Office. I wandered towards town along the main street through the row of fraternity houses. No souls roamed around. I began wondering if a horde of zombies had swept through the neighborhood last night and feasted on all the young, inebriated brains.

I heard some melodious singing. Oh brothers, the music sounded, like sweet medicine to my aching ears, as if the gates of heaven had opened up, and I found an ataraxic refuge. Then I stopped on that sidewalk and saw a tiny

church tucked between two fraternity houses, which I never noticed before.

I ran to the front doors of the church and rushed inside. I found an empty spot in the back row. I stood with the joyous congregation and joined in as we sang the Hymn *10,000 Reasons*. Oh brothers, I sang my lungs out and clapped to the beat, "Bless the Lord O my soul..."

I sang and sang and sang, and clapped, and clapped, and clapped. And the more I sang and clapped, the better I felt. I found my salvation.

After singing, a church deacon walked along the aisle with an offering bag. As he made it to my row, I grabbed all the money from my jean's pocket, crumpled it into my hand, and dropped it into that bag.

That one act lifted the curse on my sore stomach. I felt recharged, as if I were a drained battery left plugged in and charged for the whole night.

The pastor read a sermon about doing good deeds in a wicked world. Then we sang our last song and knelt on the floor to pray to Almighty God. After prayer, I rose to my feet and shook the outstretched hands of my neighbors. "God bless," I said to each one of them, and they returned a blessing to me.

A neatly dressed man, in the whitest shirt I had ever seen and polished black shoes that sparkled under the incandescent lights, walked towards me. His shoes even matched his black slacks. "Hello, I'm David."

"Hello. I'm Jax." Then I shook his hand.

"We would like to invite you to our potluck lunch."

"That's great, but I didn't bring anything."

"That's okay. You're still invited."

The congregation started walking to the exit doors of the church, and we got in line to follow. Walking by the bulletin

board, I saw several notices and one caught my eye – *Volunteers needed at the Homeless Shelter.*

I stopped to read it.

David said, “We help feed and house the homeless in the community. We’re always looking for good volunteers.”

“Perhaps I can volunteer some of my time.”

“The church appreciates any help.”

After walking out the front doors of the church, many church members went to their cars to retrieve covered pots and Tupperware containers and place them on the wooden picnic table.

The pastor called the hungry congregation to order. We stood, bowed our heads, and prayed again, thanking God for the food.

David said, “Jax, since you’re a visitor, you get to go to the head of the line.”

I grabbed a plate and cutlery, and walked around the table. I plopped a piece of roasted chicken on my plate, a hill of mashed potatoes drowned in mushroom gravy, corn on the cob, a couple of cookies, and steamed rice.

I sat down in a lawn chair towards the back. I truly was in heaven and wolfed my food down. David and his two cronies sat next to me. I am sure they always asked the same questions they always ask new visitors to the church.

“How’s the food?”

“Delicious,” as I stuffed my mouth with a spoonful of mashed potatoes and gravy.

“Are you from around here?”

“No. I just moved here.”

“I take it you came here to study at the university.”

“Of course.”

David fired a barrage of questions. After dispensing with the pleasantries, he started to ask some interesting questions that he probably doesn’t ask new members.

"I take it you know Dean Tremaine."

"Ugh, of course I know him. I study business, so we run into each other from time to time."

"You do?"

"Of course. That's why I chose to study here. He has transformed the business school into one of the best in this state."

"I didn't know that; but the Dean might not be who you think he is. What if I told you he does dirty business here and there."

"No way. I would need proof."

"What if I told you he encouraged a wealthy benefactor to build a new football stadium."

"That's great, but I don't see why that's a problem?"

"But he talked the mayor and city council to use eminent domain to seize the land for the stadium."

"Okay, but I don't still see why that's a problem."

"Several homeowners didn't want to sell, but the city seized their land and evicted the homeowners."

"Yeah, but the Dean and city government did it for the greater good."

"One of the homeowners was a long time member of this church."

"Look, I know it's a sad story. But most people in this community will benefit, especially when thousands of new fans come here and spend their hard-earned money at local businesses."

"But she died days later." David used his hands to form a cross over his heart and added, "God bless her soul."

"My condolences. It sounds like an unfortunate event, but I don't think the Dean killed her."

"True. She died of a heart attack."

One of David's companions said, "Tell him about next year's tuition hike."

“What?” I asked.

David continued, “Oh yeah. The university underestimated the cost of the new stadium. I heard a rumor the university will raise the tuition fifteen percent.”

“What?”

“Fifteen percent.”

I felt my heart drop as if my heart tripped and tumbled down a deep well. “Are you kidding me?”

“Oh, I thought you said it’s good for the community?”

“It is. But I didn’t know about the tuition increase.”

“What? You don’t want to help contribute to economic development of the community? Your tuition dollars at work.”

“I do, but the tuition is already high.”

“It’ll be higher next year, unless we do something about it now.”

“What can we do? We can’t fight the university.”

“Ah, but we can.”

“How can we fight the university?”

“We can’t tell you right now.”

“Why not?”

“You need to verify the information for yourself.”

“How can I do that?”

“I work for the student newspaper. Just come to my office, and you can read the articles and complaint letters.”

“Okay. I think I’ll do that.”

“Then you’ll see the Dean’s an evil person.”

“I never thought he was evil. I don’t picture him dancing naked in the woods, wearing a goat’s head, and sacrificing animals.”

“No, but he’s furious with our church.”

“So what? You made him angry. It’s not like he can retaliate against this church?”

“He wants to shut our church down.”

"Seriously?"

"Yes. The Dean convinced the city to condemn our property and take over it. We're trying to challenge that."

"What's the point? What does he gain if he closes the church down?"

"Our church protested against him several times. So he thinks he can drive the opposition away by shutting down our church."

"What's he planning to do with your property?"

"He'll divide the land between our two fraternity neighbors. I heard the fraternities will convert our land into a parking lot and tennis courts."

"Damn. What a prick." I raised my hand to my mouth, "Excuse my language."

I continued eating my delicious home cooked food and, brothers,. I felt something had pulled me into a cause, but I had no idea how crazy things would become.

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I returned to my dorm room late in the afternoon.

My roommate sat at his desk with his chair tilted back and feet propped on the desk with the town's newspaper sprawled out in front of him. He turned his head towards me when I had entered the room, "Did you hear the news?"

"No. What news?" I said.

"Someone broke into a garage in downtown and stole five thousand dollars last night."

"Really? Show me."

He flipped to the front page and showed me the headline.

I grabbed the paper. Right there in black and white. My little misdeed had made the front-page news in this tiny town.

I read the story. The police are investigating the break-in at Mike's Garage last night. The police believed some drug addicts had broken into the garage and stolen the money to support their addiction.

I returned the newspaper to Drew. I said, "I guess we should be careful. This town's full of thieving drug addicts."

"Tell me about it."

I asked, "So what did you do last night?"

"Me, I went to a frat party last night. What about you?"

"I went to Mad Murphy's and drank several beers and played pool."

Mike grinned and looked into my eyes, "Isn't that bar close to Mike's Garage?"

"I don't know. I don't have a car, so I never been to any repair shops in this town. Why? What do you think?"

"I don't know. Maybe it's a poor college student who's a little short on funds. He needs a little more financial aid to cover his tuition bill."

"Yeah, it could be, but I am not even sure where Mike's Garage is."

"So you didn't see any suspicious characters last night?"

"Yeah, I saw suspicious characters everywhere last night. The whole bar was filled with them."

We burst out laughing.

"So dude, are you hungry?" Drew asked.

"Maybe a little."

"Then let's go get some dinner."

"Alright."

Drew folded the newspaper and tossed it on his cluttered desk. Then we walked to the crowded cafeteria.

I wasn't hungry, but, damn, was I thirsty. I think I could drink twenty sodas. Perhaps I should continue with my food experiments since the cafeteria was stocked like laboratory. I strolled to the soda dispenser with eight soda flavors. I

grabbed three glasses and added crushed ice. Then I sprayed a little of this and added a little bit of that. Who knows? Perhaps I would create the next great flavored soda to take America by storm. Once that money starts rolling in, I run to the financial aid office, stand in the dragon lady's door way, drop my trousers, bend over, and tell her which spot to kiss my hairy ass.

Drew scarfed down some type of mysterious casserole like a bulldozer clearing a forest while I savored my different concoctions. One concoction tasted okay, but I didn't think it would take America by storm.

Drew finished the last bite of casserole and dropped his fork onto the tray, "Let's go."

We rose and slid our trays through the narrow window to the kitchen and headed outside. Walking across the main street that cut through campus with bumper-to-bumper traffic, I noticed an approaching police car with two officers sitting in the front.

My sensitive heart started racing while beads of perspiration formed on my forehead.

The cop car began slowing down.

We walked between cars and made it to the other side of the busy street.

The cop car stopped next to us. Then the driver's window rolled down. "Excuse me," the officer sitting on the passenger side said.

I thought I swallowed my tongue, as my words remained stuck in my mouth like peanut butter. I started thinking: *have I been caught?* Will I finish my college degree behind bars? Will I work at the prison library and educate the state's criminals?

Drew and I turned to face the officer.

The police officer repeated, "Excuse me."

Drew said, “Yes sir.” Then he started walking towards the police car. I trailed behind him, hoping I would not trip and fall down and reveal my guilt.

“Do you know the way to Halverson Hall?”

“Yes, sir,” Drew said. Then Drew pointed in the direction we had come from, “It’s the old dormitory over there on the other side of those tall oak trees.”

The cop nodded his head slightly. The window rolled up, and the cop car pulled away.

Drew turned to look at me, “What’s wrong dude? It looks like you’ve seen a ghost.”

“No way.”

“Let me guess, you have outstanding traffic tickets, and the state has suspended your right to drive?”

“Of course not. I never owned a car. Come on. Let’s go.”

“I’m just saying. You’re acting weird.”

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I spent the whole week drifting through my boring classes. At some moments, I felt better, even though that tuition bill was still wrapped around my vulnerable throat and choked the life out of me. Other times, I felt this intense guilt for what I did. I thought about slipping the money into an envelope with a yellow stick-it note: *I’m sorry*. Then I would slip the envelope into the mailbox at Mike’s Garage.

Finally, Friday came. I rose early. After showering and dressing, I retrieved the money from my dirty laundry and shoved it into my front jeans pocket.

After my morning class, I headed to the administration building, the tallest structure in the town. We called it the dark tower because it loomed over the edge of campus with its brown steel and dark tinted windows. It looked like a

centipede standing upright, with dark, staring eyes covering the whole body.

Approaching the building, I noticed the brown paneling appeared especially black in the morning sun. I walked through the front doors and headed to the first floor to the bursar's office.

Only two silent students stood in line. I headed to the bathroom and entered a small stall. I locked the stall door and leaned my back against the door, pulled out the money and counted it.

Yup, a thousand dollars. It's here and now. If I pay my bill, I can't return the stolen money to Mike's Garage.

I shoved the money into my pocket again and stood in line.

I waited and waited and waited. Finally, my turn had come.

I approached the counter and said, "Hello. How are you this fine, bright sunny morning?"

A middle-aged lady with thick horn-rimmed glasses just stared at me. Then she said, "Student number?"

"Oh yeah. That's right." I pulled out my wallet and grabbed my student ID and slid it to her through the slot under the bullet-proof window.

She squinted at the ID and looked at me. Then she keyed my number into the computer terminal.

I glanced at her desk on the other side of the counter and saw a faded picture on her desk - a happy, smiling clerk standing with a group of friends on a sandy beach. The sea was a dark green-blue and the white sand looked like snow. The caption at the bottom read - San Lucas, Mexico.

"How was Mexico?"

The lady kept looking at the computer screen. It appeared she hadn't experienced any joy, happiness, and good times at least in three centuries. Even in her picture of

Mexico, she looked several hundred years younger. I imagine she probably visited there during the Middle Ages. Of course, I wouldn't even recognize that woman in the photo except she wore the same horned-rimmed glasses.

She turned to face me. "Your student account shows a balance of seven hundred dollars."

"Eh. Excuse me. I don't understand. I thought I only owed the university six-hundred and sixty dollars."

"Sir, the university charges interest on any unpaid balances."

"But I thought my classes were paid in full. I just needed to pay the second installment for my room and board."

"Sir, the university charges interest on any outstanding balances."

"Ma'am, I don't mean to complain, but is it possible to have this interest taken off my account?"

"Sir, I have no authority to adjust student accounts. You ought to speak with the financial aid office."

"Could I just pay the six-hundred and sixty dollars? Then I'll pop into the financial office and discuss this matter with them."

"Sir, next week, students with any unpaid balances will be automatically withdrawn from classes."

"So that means the university will remove me from class for an unpaid balance of forty dollars?"

"Yes sir."

"Isn't that a little –"

"Sir, other students are waiting."

I glanced behind me and saw the line had grown to a dozen unhappy students. They frowned at me as I glanced in their direction. "Okay. Okay." I pulled out my stack of money and flipped it upside down and counted out seven-hundred dollars.

Then I slid the bundle of money through the slot under the window.

She grabbed the money and started counting it.

My heart started pounding while I tapped my left foot on the floor. I watched her every move, as if the act of touching that money, she would know that I had stolen it. Then she would reach over, grab the phone, and call the police. *Such a pakapoo I am.* Brothers, wouldn't that be funny? All the students would stand, stare, and point at me as I held my head low while the police officers handcuffed me and escorted me to their squad car. Then the gossip would start. The rumor would start a student was arrested for burglary, then evolve into armed robbery of the university, until the climax - a student assaulted the dean.

At least that day, the university cashier didn't call the police, and the police never came to arrest me. The woman opened the cash drawer and sorted the money, and added them to the growing stacks of money. Then she pressed the print button on the keyboard while a printer whirled into life to print my receipt.

I'm not sure why I did it, but I scanned the environment around the office. Although a thick, bullet-proof window separated me from the cashier, I noticed the flimsy, wooden door that protected the bursar's office. Then I looked at the ceilings and corners for motion detectors and cameras. Nada! I could be in and out in five minutes.

I grabbed my receipt, and smiled. Of course, if I must steal, it's better to steal from a thief or an evil organization.

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## Chapter 4

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Brothers, I know I should find an honest job, but in this tiny town, the three fast food restaurants demand a detailed resume. I'm sure one or two of them need a French fry technician or a burger assembly engineer, but the restaurants have a bottomless supply of college students to eat through. However, guilt keeps chiseling at the back of my mind, so I used my free time to volunteer at the homeless shelter.

I walked across town to the homeless shelter on a late Saturday morning. I will give back to the community. That way, some of my good will would cancel out some of my bad. Then everything in my universe would live in harmony, and perhaps my conscience will stop screaming at me. Of course, I didn't want God to see me as a complete dirt bag as I bang on the closed gates of heaven. At least God could check a couple checkmarks for good behavior on his clipboard.

I walked to the front counter at the homeless shelter, and the woman sitting there looked up with me with a warm smile and said, "Sorry, but you're a little early for lunch."

"Uh." Then I looked down at my clothes and looked at the woman again. "No. Oh no. I'm not homeless. I would like to volunteer my time and help those in need."

The woman blushed a little, "Oh, I'm sorry sir. You should meet the director."

"Thank you."

"Just come around to the door, and I'll let you in."

The woman jumped out of her chair, came around the counter, and opened the door with a key. We walked down a small hallway to the door at the end. She knocked softly on the door.

A chirpy voice called, "Come in."

We walked in, and the woman said, "Luke, another volunteer."

"Thank you, Sister Margaret. Come on in, young man and have a seat."

The director stood up and came around his desk to shake my hand. Luke represented the consummate Christian. The crisp, bleached white dress shirt, the pressed trousers, polished black shoes and a crew-cut cut so sharply, a person could cut their finger if he were to rub his hand through Luke's hair too quickly.

Luke sat in the wooden chair next to me and asked, "I take it you're from the college?"

"Yes, sir."

"And you're here to do the Lord's work?"

"Yes, sir."

"That's great. My name's Luke."

"Just call me Jax."

Luke looked at his watch, "It's almost time to feed the unfortunate their lunch. Let me show you the kitchen."

We rose from the chairs and walked to the dining room. A line of homeless people stood quietly in a line outside the dining rooms doors. I wanted to run away, but I knew that squeaky little voice at the back of my mind would not stop nagging me.

As we walked by the homeless, Luke shook several hands and said, "Good afternoon, brother."

As we burst through the dining room doors, then lo and behold, brothers, Phaedra stood behind the counter at the buffet line. I glanced at her and looked back at Luke. *Damn, what a supercalifragilisticexpialidocious day.* Phaedra slipped ladles into the food. She focused her bored eyes on the mysterious beef gravy, but then she looked up and noticed me. After spotting me, her eyes became alive while her smile deepened.

Luke turned to me, "Brother, please help out Sister Phaedra." Then he looked at Phaedra, "Good afternoon,

sister. I've kept my promise and found someone to help you out. Jax has just joined our team. Phaedra meet Jax. Jax, meet Phaedra."

Luke shook my hand again and said, "Welcome aboard."

I walked behind the line. "Hey, Phaedra.

"Hi," Phaedra said.

I shook Phaedra's hand, and my mischievous mouth refused to stay silent. "Long time, no see. It seems like you're following me around."

"Really? I think you have it backwards. I think you're stalking me."

Luke said, "Oh, you two must know each other."

"Of course. Her father is Dean of the Business College, and we always seem to be bumping into each other."

Luke raised his eyebrow as he looked at me and then grinned, "If you need any help, just ask." Then Luke left the dinner room, while the homeless men entered the room, grabbed the yellow trays, and queued for their daily squares.

I looked at the mysterious gravy with chunks of meat bobbing up and down on top. "Do you have a permit to sell that concoction?"

"Permit? We're not selling anything. We're giving it away for free."

"So that's how you circumvent the strict government regulations to feed the unfortunate. Well, on second thought, that meat gravy looks better than the casseroles they always serve in the dorm."

"Ah, I see you haven't figured out their secret yet."

I squinted my eyes and grinned, "Secret? I thought they're serving something that resembled food."

"They are. Just think how much leftovers the students leave behind every day."

"Yeah. That has to be a lot. Probably a dumptruck filled with leftovers."

Phaedra smiled and added, "The University must do something with those leftovers."

"Ugh." I frowned and rubbed my stomach. "No wonder why my stomach always hurts when I eat the food, but it does make sense. Just add some rice or noodles, a little salt, and presto, the mysterious casserole of unknown origins. All legal in the State of Michigan."

The homeless men stared at us. The first homeless man said, "C'mon, man. We're hungry."

"You serve the rice and corn," Phaedra said.

"Okay. Let's serve these hungry people before we have a revolt on our hands."

I grabbed two scoops. Using my left hand, I scooped the rice while I ladled the corn with my right.

After thirty minutes, the last homeless person received his tray of food. I placed the ladles on a plate and wiped the sweat from my forehead with my left hand.

Phaedra looked over, "Are you hungry?"

"A little. Why?"

"We get to eat too."

"Oh, fantastic. I've been wondering what this food tastes like. We'll see if the homeless eat better than the college students."

We grabbed plates, filled the plates with the fixings and sat together. I stabbed at a beef chunk, raised it to my mouth, plopped it in, and slowly chewed it.

Phaedra looked at me, "How's the food?"

"Hhhh mmm," as I swallowed the soft beef. "Chewy but tasty." I speared another beef chunk and ate it.

"Ha ha, toats." Phaedra said as she moved the beef chunks to the side. She spooned a little rice and dipped it

into the thick gravy. After taking a bite, she asked, “What do you do on the weekends?”

“You mean after I take care of the homeless? I stay busy. I’m planning to become president of the debate club. Maybe join the boxing team. If I still have some spare time, then I’ll become a journalist for the university newspaper.”

“Wow. You stay busy.”

“Idleness is the devil’s playground. Besides, I don’t think opportunity will knock on my door as I sit in a beach chair sipping a pina-colada. I must go out and seize that opportunity. So what do you do on the weekends?”

“You know, a little of this. A little of that.”

“Ah, it sounds you stay busy just like me. You know what. Since, I’m new to your town, perhaps you can show me around.”

“There’s really not much to see, but I can check my schedule.”

“Great. But before you show me your town, we should become friends on Facebook.” Brothers, before I knew what happen. She pulled a pen from her pocket and wrote her Facebook name on a brown napkin.

I folded that napkin and slipped it into my shirt pocket.

“So how long have –”

The cook burst through the swinging doors of the kitchen and yelled, “Hey you two. After youse finish eating, could youse please put away the trays of food and clean the serving table?”

I looked over to the kitchen door and saw a roly-poly of a person with a grizzly beard wearing a White Sox baseball cap. “Oh yeah, don’t forget to sweep and mop the dining room.” Then he disappeared into the kitchen.

“Who’s he?” I asked.

“That’s Raymond, the cook.”

"For a minute, the way he shouted at us, I thought he was our boss."

"He pretends to be. Some men can't handle power."

We grabbed our trays, placed them on the tray cart, and started to clean up the dining room.

A homeless man wearing a faded green army jacket walks in and grabs a yellow tray.

Raymond popped out of the kitchen again and said, "Sorry sir, but you're late for lunch."

"But, but, I've -" the homeless man rambled.

"You know the rules. The kitchen closes at one o'clock sharp. No exceptions."

I interjected. "C'mon, man. The guy's hungry."

Raymond stared coldly at me, "No exceptions."

"But I thought we're supposed to help people who're in need?"

"We do, but only when the kitchen's open. No exceptions. If we let one guy come late, then tomorrow two more will come late. By next week, they'll all come late. Then we'll never get out of here."

"I'm not trying to start a conflict, but you never asked this person if he has a good excuse for being late."

"Look, I know you're new here. Trust me. We impose these rules for a reason."

"Okay. Okay."

The homeless guy slammed his tray on top of the stack of trays and stormed out of the dining room. After Raymond returned to the kitchen, I winked at Phaedra.

Phaedra raised her eyebrows in a question mark.

"Cover for me," I whispered.

I ran out the door and caught up to the homeless guy before he walked out of the building onto the street.

I tapped him on the shoulder.

His shoulder convulsed at my touch, and he spun around with his eyes wide open. He clenched his hands into fists.

“Hey man. I’m on your side. I’ll grab you some food. Just wait here by the front door. Okay?”

He relaxed and nodded his head up and down slightly. Then he slowly sat in a metal chair by the door.

I ran to the stainless steel table behind the buffet counter, where Phaedra had wrapped the tray of leftovers with plastic wrap and lined them up in a row. She looked up when I entered the door. “I thought you were being a typical man and ran away from kitchen work.”

“No way.” Then I held my index finger to my mouth, “Shhhh.” I grabbed a takeaway box, lifted a corner of the plastic wrap and used a large spoon to fill the box with two mountains of rice and corn. Then I flooded the rest of the box with beef chunks and gravy.

I closed the lid, grabbed a plastic spoon and fork, and jogged to the homeless guy.

I’ve never seen a person smile so deeply, as his hands reached for the warm box.

I jogged back to the dining room, but no one was there. I grabbed a broom and started sweeping.

Phaedra returned to the dining room. “How’s your new friend?”

“He’s good. I left him with a broad, beaming smile on his face.”

Her smile deepened. She grabbed a towel and began wiping down the dining room tables.

I returned to work. I finished sweeping that floor. Then I mopped it, and made sure that dining room floor sparkled. After finishing, we headed into the kitchen. I put the cleaning supplies away in the mop closet, while Phaedra headed to the manager’s office.

We crossed paths again as Phaedra walked out of the office, and we said our goodbyes.

I saw Raymond sitting in the tiny office in the kitchen and walked in. "Hello. Should I write something down?"

"Why? You in trouble too?"

"What do you mean?" Then I looked down and saw the logbook that Phaedra had signed. *Community Service Log* was written across the top in large bold letters.

I looked at Raymond again as a grin stretched from ear to ear. "No. I'm good. I'm not in trouble yet, but that could always change."

"You're free to go after you finish cleaning the dining room."

"Sir, I left that dining room sparkling."

"Good. Sorry about that late guy. We've had trouble with him in the past."

"I understand. Rules are rules." I turned and strolled out of the office. I thought Phaedra was a nice girl, who cared about the homeless, but those words *community service log* seared question marks in my mind. I know I could never be a saint, but deep down inside us, humans possess a propensity for mischief and badness. But it never depends on how bad we are, we always search for a mate who is as pristine and pure as a newborn kitten in the world. I want a good girl, not a bad girl.

Perhaps my mind was jumping to conclusions. Perhaps her crime was as simple as parking a car with one of the wheels touching the white line, or she forgot to return a library book.

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A few days later while laying on my bed, I pulled out my lucky key with Phaedra's napkin wrapped around it.

My roommate, Drew, was sitting at his desk sketching a star battleship at war with another ship. He turned to face me. “What you got there?”

“Do you remember the freshmen welcome reception?”

“How could I forget? I’m sure you made the Dean’s shit list.”

“Well, the stew certainly thickens. The Dean’s daughter gave me her Facebook contact info.”

Drew’s eyes enlarged while his mouth opened wide, “Really? That’s awesome dude. How’d you get it?”

“I asked for it, and she just gave it to me.” Snapping my fingers, “Just like that.”

“What’s your next magic trick Houdini?”

“I’m going to talk to her.”

“Damn dude. You’re gonna really piss the Dean off.”

“I’ll try my best.” I picked up my phone, turned on the FB app, and searched for Phaedra. Then I searched through her Facebook pictures. I saw nothing to indicate she was a naughty girl. I saw many pictures where she attended church and university social functions. None of this explained the community service at the homeless center.

I tapped the button for a friend request.

Drew said, “What’s her profile pic look like?”

I tilted the phone, so he could see her profile picture.

Drew jumped out of his chair, ran over, and grabbed my phone, “Not bad.”

Then his finger swiped across the phone to look at Phaedra’s other pictures. “Look here. She’s standing next to papa, the Dean. Your new best friend.”

“Yup. That’s the Dean alright. Pompous prick.”

“Ugh. You’re gonna get burned while playing with fire.”

“Don’t worry. I’m sure he’s a nice guy. He just shows his tough-guy exterior. When we meet again, we’ll hit it off. I’ll charm him and win him over.”

"Well, that's not what I heard. Everyone says the dude is a real dick." Drew returned my phone. He wandered to his bed and hopped onto it.

After five minutes, Drew asked, "Did she add you yet?"

I picked up the phone and looked, "Nope."

Ten minutes later, "Did she add you yet?"

"Will you stop? Everything in good time. I'm sure she's not waiting at home for a friend request."

Then an hour later, I looked at my phone, "Bingo."

"Cool man. What you gonna say to her?"

"I'll be a little naughty." I started typing.

*Hello beautiful. How are you?*

*Fine. How are you?*

*Doing well. Would you believe I had a dream about you last night?*

*Really?*

*Yeah. It was a good dream.*

*What'd you dream about?*

*I dreamed we were walking along a beach at sunset. The waves caress the shoreline. A flock of birds flew above us and sung a sweet melody.*

Drew came over and read my message. "Dude, you can't do that"

"Why not? I'm being romantic with her. Trust me. It drives the women crazy." I continued typing.

*turned to face each other. Then we leaned towards each other and started kissing, as the sun set. We kissed for hours while the baby turtles hatched from their eggs and scampered to the waves.*

Drew shouted, “Dude, you’re crazy.” Drew walked to his bed again, shaking his head back and forth. “You blew it, man. You really blew it.”

“Hold on.”

After twenty minutes, Phaedra wrote, “Did you really dream of me?”

“Of course. I could dream about you every night as I get to taste the sweetness of your lips.

Hhhmmmm.

“Do you like international food?”

“Of course. I can never get enough of culture and fine foods.

Next week, the students organize the International Food Festival.”

“Oh yeah. It’s next Saturday. Why? Do you want to go?”

“Maybe.”

“Then let’s go. We can sample food from other cultures. We’ll have a blast.”

“Maybe.”

“Even though I could talk to you for hours, I must go. I have so much stuff to do.”

“Okay. Bye then.”

“Bye girl. We’ll see each other tonight in my dreams again.”

Drew said, “She blew you off?”

“Nope. We may be going to the international food festival next Saturday.”

“Seriously, dude?”

“Seriously.”

“She bought that beach story.”

“Apparently. She may meet me.”

"Damn. I never thought about doing something so direct like that." Drew sat down at his desk and grabbed a pencil, "By the way, did you really dream about her?"

"Maybe I didn't dream about her last night, but if I were to dream about her, that'd be the dream I would have."

"Damn dude, she's the Dean's daughter."

"Yup, the Dean's daughter. I think the Dean and I will become great friends. We'll be bumping into each other all the time."

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## Chapter 5

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After economics class, I walked to the ancient building that housed the Department of English. I wandered the halls searching for that elusive university newspaper. I almost gave up until a perplexed professor sitting at his desk watched me walk by several times.

Professor cleared his throat as I passed his door once again, "Young man, what are you looking for?"

I returned to the doorway, "The university newspaper."

"You will find it downstairs." He pointed to the left, "Just take that stairwell down to the basement. It's around the corner."

"Thank you, sir." I walked downstairs and found the university newspaper tucked between the janitor's closet and a storage room.

I walked into a room with two vintage wooden desks and a long table with a surface scarred from years of students etching graffiti, names, and various sexual acts on it. Three computer workstations that were older than me were set up across the long table's surface. I looked around. Damn brothers, how could I change the world with this old office and ancient computers?

David hopped out of his seat.

"Hi brother."

"Hey. I took you up on your offer. So here I am. What was that nonsense you were talking about last Sunday, like the next year's tuition hike?"

"I'm glad you came. I'll show you."

We walked to the first computer on the long table. David scooted some chairs around so we both sit down and could read the ancient CRT monitor.

"Let me power up the computer."

After several minutes, he clicked on the archive folder and clicked on a file that opened the newspaper on August 15, 2007.

I'll admit I was on campus that day and picked up the newspaper. But I only browsed through it and left it on the cafeteria table for the next patron.

David pointed to an article, "See right here. Dean Tremaine said the board of trustees has approved a tuition hike for next year."

I read the story. Then I looked at David and asked, "But it does not say how much. It just says because of extraordinary and unforeseen expenses, the tuition increase could be significant next year."

"Right."

"This seems unusual but why is Dean Tremaine speaking for the university? Shouldn't the university president announce this?"

"I heard the president will step down, and the Dean plans to take his place."

I shivered, "Oh god. I can't imagine the Dean being the new president."

"He's being groomed. I guess the board is testing his leadership skills by the way he handles the tuition hike."

I reiterated, "But the story does not say how much."

David clicked on another newspaper file dated July 5, 2007. He said, "Then read this story."

I read the story. The university underestimated the construction cost of the football stadium. I looked at David again, "I like how the university says a lot, but it does not say anything at all. The story does not even indicate how much the university had underestimated the tuition."

"I keep hearing rumors that put the university is short by five million."

"Five million?"

“Yup.”

“But those are rumors. How reliable is that five million?”

“I have my sources.”

“But are your sources reliable?”

“Of course, they are.”

“Who are they?”

“I’m not at liberty to say.

“Okay. I see.”

“Brother, I’m not being rude, but it’s a small town. Several church members work in the university admin. The university creates truckloads of paperwork every day, and someone must process that paperwork.”

I shook my head back and forth, “We need to do something about this?”

“Like what?”

“We should write a story and inform the students.”

“Good luck.”

“What do you mean?”

“The admin reviews every story and every ad before it can be printed in the newspaper.”

“We must do something. What can I do to help?”

“We’re always looking for journalists. Could you lend a hand to the newspaper?”

“I can try. So how would I go about researching and writing a story about the tuition hike?”

“First, you ought to speak to the Dean. Make an appointment with him. He would know the details.”

“Okay. I’ll call the Dean’s secretary and make an appointment with him.”

“But remember, the university never prints any story that shows the admin in a bad light.”

“Perhaps I could craft the story so it would slip through the censors.”

“Good luck.”

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Two days later, I’m sitting on a leather couch in the anteroom at Dean Tremaine’s Office.

I glanced at the secretary as she reads a book on how to traverse the fifteen steps to become a great leader.

I cleared my throat and asked as I tapped my wristwatch, “Excuse me. It’s two fifteen. Where’s the Dean?”

She lowered her book and glared at me, “He’s in an important meeting.”

“I know, you already informed me that when I came here, but I thought that important meeting was with me.”

“The Dean’s a very busy man. He has many meetings throughout the day.”

“Thank you.”

The secretary returned to reading her book while I watched two flies procreate and create offspring on the edge of the secretary’s desk.

I waited, waited, and waited for the Dean. I glanced at the opened office door to the hallway and look for my remnants of breakfast that I had left there three weeks ago. Lucky for me, the janitors scrubbed the floor spotless, and my experimental breakfast was long gone.

At three thirty, the Dean strolled in through the office front door.

I rose.

The Dean saw me. Then he turned and said, “Good day, young man. I apologize for keeping you waiting.” He extended his hand for a handshake.

I shook his hand, “No problem.”

“Jeanine, did I receive any important phone calls?”

“Yes sir. Just two. Jim asked you to return his phone call, and your wife said don’t forget to buy potatoes on the way home tonight.”

The Dean looked at me, “Shall we discuss your story in my office, please.”

Following the Dean into his office, I glanced down at his shoes and saw a grass stain on the cuff of his trousers and several blades of grass stuck out from the soles of his shoes.

The Dean sat down behind his desk while I sat across from him.

I asked, “So how’s your golf swing?”

The Dean smiled. After an awkward pause, “I heard you are writing a story for the newspaper. How can I help you?”

“I’m here to research next year’s tuition hike.”

The dean scratched his chin, “I see.”

“How much did the board approve?”

“The board is still considering all the possibilities. Tuition could rise about ten percent, but that is just an estimate.”

“Ten percent?”

“Yes. The university has experienced unusual costs these last few years. The university must keep improving the quality of the education. Many buildings will be renovated, upgraded, and fitted with the latest technology. Furthermore, the university has experienced fewer freshmen entering the university.”

“So let me understand this correctly. The tuition hike has nothing to do with the construction of the new football stadium?”

The Dean jerked his head back as if I punched him in the mouth with Mike Tyson’s jab. “Sir, how dare you utter such words? Unfortunately, some members of our community must spread false rumors and gossip that holds no support

with reality. The stadium's construction cost has zilch to do with the tuition enhancement."

The Dean leaned back in his chair and smiled. "You see, the athletics department has their own costs and revenues. The university does not subsidize the athletics department."

"So no tuition dollars will be used to finance the new football stadium?"

"No tuition dollars had ever financed the athletic department, and nor will any dollars be used to build the new football stadium."

I looked at the Dean as a grin spread from ear to ear. A politician's smile.

"Won't the tuition hike impact the low-income students?"

"Sir, I object to your terminology. You are confusing the terms tuition hike and tuition enhancement. Those are two separate words."

"I apologize. Won't the tuition enhancement impact the low-income students more?"

"We developed a contingency plan to aid the low-income students. The university understands and cares for all its students. The Financial Aid Office will raise the number of need-based scholarships and ensure the low-income students will not be burdened by the tuition enhancement."

"That's great. How much more scholarships will the university offer?"

The Dean raised his eyebrows, "You look familiar. Have we met before?"

I looked over and saw an antique alabaster chess game set up on an antique Victorian wooden table with a white marble top. The grey and olive green chess pieces looked hand carved.

The Dean continued. "I do believe we have met before."

“I don’t think so.”

“Ah, I recall now – the freshmen welcoming party.”

“Oh, perhaps we did meet once before.”

The Dean shook his finger at me, “I believe you left early during my speech.”

I looked at him and shrugged my shoulders, “It was a long speech, sir.”

He continued, “I suppose an emergency had called you away.”

“Yes, that is it. I had a family crisis. That’s why I left early. Please sir, let’s return to our discussion of the scholarships again.”

The Dean stared at me.

“How much will the university contribute for new scholarships?”

“As I have already expounded, the responsibilities of the Financial Aid Office is to ensure every student receives the aid they require to attend the university. We are in the business of educating students. Where would the university’s future lie if we made our splendid education too expensive?”

“But you do see where I’m coming from? If the university raises an additional ten million in tuition revenue and increases scholarships by the same amount, then the university does not come out ahead?”

The Dean looked at his watch. “I apologize, prior engagements require my attention.”

“But I still have one more question. If the university raises tuition, could freshmen enrollment drop even more? Wouldn’t that exacerbate the financial crisis?”

“Excuse me, sir. I must attend a meeting.” Then the Dean pointed his index finger at me, “The university will not sacrifice a single student as it institutes its tuition

enhancement next year. Good day. Please show yourself out."

"Thank you for your time. Good day."

\*\*\*

That night, the Dean held a question-and-answer session with the student body at the Student Union. He planned to discuss the next year's tuition hike or enhancement, or whatever he called it, if it helps him sleep at night.

Drew and I came early and sat towards the back near the coffee shop. As we sipped coffee, students swarmed in as a thick, roaring crowd and even blocked our view of the platform.

I was surprised to see this activity at the student union and searched the area for a beer keg but didn't see one. I said, "There's way too many people for this speech. There must be a beer keg hiding around somewhere near here."

Drew said, "I don't think this is a frat party. People are always happy to be drinking beer. Here, everyone looks furious."

I felt the electrical charge build in the air as a violent storm of students were forming. "You know, I think this is what a revolution feels like before the mobs turn ugly."

The Dean arrived with a contingent of security guards surrounding him. As the Dean approached the platform, the mob heckled and hissed.

The Dean approached the podium while the security guards spread themselves out in front of the stage. The Dean tapped the mike and then addressed the crowds, "Thank you for coming today. I know you took time out of your busy schedules..."

Students refused to remain quiet. They kept talking, arguing and jeering that drowned out the Dean's voice.

When the Dean paused, the angry crowds became silent and one student screamed, “I can’t afford another tuition hike.”

Another student shouted, “Greedy bastards.”

Other students shouted in unison. Oh brothers, for a moment, I felt sorry for the Dean. I couldn’t work for in an employer where almost everyone hated and vilified me.

I nudged Drew on the arm and pointed towards the exit. “Let’s go. This speech does not look like it’s going anywhere.”

Drew nodded his head in agreement.

We headed outside and returned to the dorm room. I just laid back on my bed to write that newspaper article while Drew listened to music. I wrote, wrote, and wrote. Finally, I examined my literary masterpiece – University Admin Hikes Next Year’s Tuition.

The next morning, brothers, I sprinted to the university newspaper and showed it to David.

David grabbed that paper and quickly read it. Then he burst into laughter.

I asked, “What’s wrong?”

“Sorry, Jax. The university will never print that article.”

“Why? I told the truth. I did not bias the information.”

“It doesn’t matter. The administration censors the newspaper. They determine which stories are published and which ones are not.”

“Can’t the newspaper exercise its first amendment rights?”

“We sure can, but the university finances the newspaper, so we wouldn’t have any funds to publish the paper anymore. Besides, the professors only teach you the Bill of Rights. We don’t follow them. This is purely theoretical.”

“But the students must know.”

"I agree."

I sighed and just stared at David.

David continued, "I'll tell you what. I will put that story on the second page and hide it at the bottom. Then you'll see what'll happen."

"Fair enough."

The next morning, I jumped out of bed and ran downstairs with no shoes. I grabbed a newspaper out of the rack and tore it open.

My mouth opened wide while I raised my eyebrows. The place where my story should've been was replaced with an ad for an Italian restaurant near campus.

I shouted, "God dammit."

I returned to my room and called David.

After several rings, a groggy voice, "Hello."

"Hey David. Guess who?"

"Ah, I've give up."

"Jax."

"Hey Jax. It's a little early."

"I know, but I saw today's paper. You were right. The university did not print my article."

"I told you so. The university censors the press, and it will never print an article that shows the university in a bad light."

"But we must inform the students."

"The write another article, but tone it down. Then try again."

After class, I went to the library again and rewrote my article. I attempted to craft the prose so I wouldn't upset the university's censors.

Northern Mackinaw University will raise tuition for its popular programs next year. The tuition increase could overshadow past tuition increases.

Students and the university community were informed of the tuition hike via email. The Board of Trustees regrets the decision to raise tuition and recognizes this will hurt some students. But the university must remain financially sustainable.

During an open-forum meeting last Wednesday, Dean Tremaine notified students, faculty, and other members of the university of a plan, if approved, would raise tuition about ten percent next year. Many students and attendees were upset as they listened to the Dean' speech.

The Dean said the university experienced unusual costs in the past years. Furthermore, declining freshmen enrollment has impacted the university's sustainability. The administration assures us this will be a one-time increase. The state governor and legislature have already approved the tuition hike and stand behind the leadership of the university.

The university will aggressively boost its recruitment to raise student enrollment. Enhancing student enrollment would mitigate future tuition increases. Furthermore, the university president will corroborate with other university presidents and work with the governor and legislature to boost future state funding.

As one student stated during Wednesday's meeting, "The university cannot continue to raise tuition. It makes it tougher for the low-income students to attend a university."

Another student said, "Most students receive some form of financial aid, and the tuition hike will lead to the university's undoing."

The Dean reassured the students. The university will do everything in its power to reduce the burden on the low-income students. The university will contribute more need-based scholarships to help at-risk students. The Dean said, "The university will not sacrifice a single student as it raises its tuition next year."

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Brothers, I smiled like I never smiled before when I looked at my article. Now I know how Picasso felt when he put the last brush stroke on his masterpiece. I jogged to the university newspaper and showed it to David.

David read it. "The story is good, but you may still encounter problems with the admin. But we can try to publish the story again. I'll place the story on the last page."

"Okay. That's all I ask."

I had to wait a week before the next issue of the newspaper came out., but, when that issue came, I jumped out of bed, ran downstairs to the foyer and grabbed a newspaper. I flipped the paper to the last page.

And low and behold, I saw my story on the last page.

Brothers, somehow I broadened an already wide smile and began reading my story.

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### University Considering a Slight Tuition Enhancement

Northern Mackinaw University is studying a slight tuition increase for its popular programs next year. The tuition enhancement will be in line with past tuition increases.

Students and the university community were informed of the tuition hike via email. The Board of Trustees regrets the decision to raise tuition and recognizes this might compromise some students. But the university must remain financially sustainable.

During an open-forum meeting last Wednesday, Dean Tremaine notified the students, faculty, and other members of the university of a plan, if approved, would raise tuition about five percent next year. Many students and attendees were excited as they listened to Dean's Tremaine's speech.

The Dean said the university experienced unexpected costs in the past years. Furthermore, declining enrollment has impacted the university's sustainability. The administration assures us this will be a one-time increase. The state governor and legislature have already approved the tuition hike last year and stand behind the leadership of the university.

The university will aggressively boost its recruiting to raise student enrollment. Enhancing student enrollment would mitigate future tuition increases. Furthermore, the university president will corroborate with other university presidents and work with the governor and legislature to boost future state funding.

As one student stated during Wednesday's meeting, "The university cannot continue to raise tuition, but I am glad the university will boost scholarships for the low-income students."

Another student said, "Most students receive some form of financial aid. Even though I am not happy about the tuition increase, we must make crucial sacrifices to help the university."

The Dean reassured the students. The university will do everything in its power to aid the low-income students. The university will boost funding for need-based scholarships to

help the at-risk students. The Dean said, "The university will not sacrifice a single student as it implements its tuition enhancement next year."

—

A corrosive anger tore through my body like a bullet. I screamed, "God dammit. They changed my story." *Corrupt my words, those bumfiddlers.* The admin secretly employed me as their complicit smuck as if I had approved of their tuition hike.

At that time, we didn't know Dean Tremaine and the university admin had lied about next year's tuition hike. The university planned to raise tuition by fifteen percent and not the slight tuition enhancement that they kept calling it. The university played charades to fool the students into accepting the excessively high tuition hike.

I ran to Dean Tremaine's Office, stood in front of the secretary's desk, but she refused to let me see him.

I pounded on her desk. "I need to see the Dean now."

"His schedule is full. Please come back next week."

I pounded on the desk again, "Where's the Dean?"

"I'll call camp -"

The Dean poked his head out the office door, "Jeanine, may I enquire about the disturbance?"

"This student demands to see you."

The Dean gazed at me. Then he opened his office door wide.

I walked into his office while he sat in his chair. I sat across him.

He snapped, "Young man, what do you want?"

I placed the newspaper on his desk. Then I pointed at the story."

He glanced at the newspaper. "It's a news story. It looks like your story if I am not mistaken?"

"It's my name, but that's not my story."

"Then why is your name written as the reporter?"

"Because the story I turned in was changed by someone in the administration."

"That is a serious accusation. Who changed it?"

"Somebody in the administration."

"You must identify the person who you say had changed your story? Do you have any proof?"

I just stared at the Dean. He had me, and by his wide smirk, he knew it. I shook my head back in forth and mumbled, "I don't believe this."

The Dean's grin widened, "Then I have no authority to request a probe into this matter."

I rose to my feet. Brothers, I wanted to punch the Dean square in the nose. Unfortunately, that bastard probably would let me punch him. Then he would expel me from the university, and my college career ends. I would be working as a serf in the fast food industry for the rest of my pathetic life.

I stormed out of the office.

The Dean yelled, "Good day, young man."

I marched to the university newspaper.

David was leaning back in his chair with his feet propped on the desk. He was reading an old paperback novel – some detective story.

He closed the book, slid his feet to the ground and leaned forward on his desk.

I just looked at him.

"I told you. The admin does not play fair."

"They changed my story."

"I know. I saw today's paper."

I frowned.

"You also have fan mail."

"Fan mail?"

David pointed to the long table. On the end, a paper tray overflowed with thick letters.

I sat down at the table, pulled the tray closer to me, and started opening and reading the letters. Brothers, I felt so sick. The students blamed me for the tuition hike. I don't know how many letters I read, but they all shared a common theme - they can't afford a tuition hike. Many complained they already work long hours at their jobs and have little time for classes and studying. Several letters moaned about the idiots in the financial aid office. Blah, blah, blah.

David asked, "So how does it look?"

"It seems the students are blaming me for the tuition hike."

"It looks like the university set you up and made you an unsuspecting accomplice in their propaganda machine."

I noticed many students included their email addresses and social media contacts.

I held one letter up and pointed at an email address. "At least we can contact the students via directly."

"So how does that help us?"

Then thoughts swept through my mind. "I don't know. Maybe we can create a mailing list."

"I like your thinking. Perhaps we can establish an underground newspaper. Then we can email the students directly, thus circumventing the university's censors."

"That's a great idea."

"As an employee of the university and director of this newspaper, I cannot officially help you with your development." Then David held an open hand near his mouth and whispered, "But I know people who can offer assistance."

I nodded my head in agreement. Then I continued reading my fan mail and added their email and Facebook contacts to my phone. I knew a brutal battle was simmering between the university and me. The university doesn't know who it's messing with.

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## Chapter 6

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Drew followed me to the International Food Festival.  
“I’ll bet, she doesn’t show.”

“Oh come on. She’ll show.”

“Serious. I’ll bet you ten bones, she’ll stood you up.”

“A ten spot?” I stopped and turned and held out my hand, “All right. You’re on.”

We sealed the deal with a handshake.

Turning the corner to the student union, Phaedra leaned against a stair railing that led up to the building. Oh brothers, did she look comely for a naughty, naughty girl, showing off her curves by wearing a tight blue dress. She even put a little weave through her blonde hair.

Drew whistled, “Nice,” as he elbowed my arm.

“Don’t pass the money here. Don’t...”

Drew pushed ten dollars into my closed hand.

“Damn you. Not cool bro.”

“Have fun, dude.”

Drew walked by Phaedra, and they exchanged hellos. Then Drew rushed inside.

I approached Phaedra and tried not to stare. *Mamihlapinatapai, oh she was!* “You look nice. So how are you?”

“Fine. So what was that about?”

“What?” with a perplexed look plastered on my face.

“Your friend handed you some money.”

“Oh that. He owed me some money for covering his cafeteria lunches.”

We walked up the stairs walked inside and approached the entrance table.

I turned to look at Phaedra and asked, “Are you hungry?”

“A little.”

“Let’s try some food then.”

One of the attendants said, "That'll be ten each."

I fished the money out of my pocket and handed him two tens. "Keep the change brother."

As I opened the door, a cornucopia of smells and spices bombarded my nose – cumin, spicy curries, and roasted meats. We walked inside into a madhouse with booths, tables, and people everywhere.

I asked, "What'd you want to try first?"

"Japanese."

We walked to the Japanese booth.

Phaedra grabbed a small paper plate and used tongs to grab an assortment of sushi. She smiled, "You'll like this," as she slathered a healthy swab of green goop on top of one of the sushi and pushed it towards my mouth."

I bit the sushi in half including a healthy helping of the green goop. Brothers, I tasted food from the Gods as I chewed, savored, and swallowed that sushi. Then a tickling sensation reverberated up and down between my throat and nose while invisible fingers started tickling the bottom of my brain.

I'm not sure if I turned red, but I heard, "Jax, are you okay?"

I nodded my head up and down several times and grabbed the edge of the table, so I wouldn't fall down.

After another pause, Phaedra asked, "Are you all right?"

The spicy sensation withered and faded. "I'm fine. What was that green stuff?"

Phaedra started laughing, "Wasabi. Maybe I put a little too much on for you."

"Wabi-sabi?"

Phaedra laughed again, "It's made from horseradish."

"Ah, that was so wrong. You're next." I slathered a healthy dab of wasabi on a piece of sushi for her. Then I raised the sushi to her mouth.

She nibbled the side of the sushi and closed her eyes and chewed slowly. Then a shiver shook through her body starting from her waist and ending at her head.

"How's the sushi?"

"Perfecto mundo."

"C'mon, let's try something else."

We walked to the Thai booth with an exotic Asian woman standing behind the table with wavy black hair and olive eyes. I'm not sure of the woman's ethnicity, but I would guess she was Thai. She folded her hands and bowed as we approached.

"Hi," I said.

The Asian woman grabbed a small plate and spooned a piece of meat with shredded green stuff. Then she handed me the plate with two small plastic forks.

"What's this?" I asked.

The woman replied, "Fried fish with shredded papaya."

"I thought papaya was reddish."

"It can be. We also use green papaya in many of our dishes."

I held the plate while Phaedra and I grabbed a tiny fork and speared the papaya."

It was delicious. Then a minute later, I felt like an arsonist had set my mouth on fire so he could collect that money from my dental insurance.

I started fanning my mouth with my hand, trying to put out the zesty flames.

Phaedra did the same thing.

I looked at the Thai woman, "It's a little spicy, huh."

"Sorry sir. It must be the green and red chilies."

I used the plastic fork to move the papaya around and that's when I spotted the little offenders - little tiny red and green flakes of chili peppers. "I think I found the culprits."

We used our forks to move the chilies to the side, and we finished the sample.

“What’d you think?” I asked.

“Different,” Phaedra said, “But quite delicious.”

“It must be healthy. I can’t imagine anything living in my stomach after eating those chilies.”

As we walked away, Phaedra asked, “So what did you think of the Thai woman?”

“What Thai woman?”

Phaedra nodded her head in the direction we had come from.

“Oh, that Thai woman.”

“Yes.”

“I didn’t really notice. Why you ask?”

“Oh come on. She’s beautiful, isn’t she?”

“I don’t know.” I turned and glanced at the Thai woman and looked into Phaedra’s eyes, and, brothers, I lied like an ambulance-chasing lawyer, “She’s okay if you like that sort. C’mon, let’s try some Turkish food.”

We walked by the Mexican food booth. That’s so passé, living in a tiny town with three Mexican restaurants. Of course, who can forget taco night at the cafeteria on Wednesday? I think they serve beef tacos but not entirely sure.

Then I looked over to the Italian table and saw Drew staring at us.

I waved.

Drew wandered over.

“Hey Jax.”

“Hey Drew. So what’re you up to?”

“I thought I would try some exotic foods just like you two. Besides, it can’t be worse than the cafeteria food.”

“Amen to that brother.”

Drew looked at the ground and then he looked at me, "What'll you guys do later on tonight?"

Phaedra and I glanced at each other and then looked away. I looked at Drew and shrugged my shoulders, "I don't know."

"Oh, I see. Could you recommend something?"

"Try the Japanese table. Don't forget that green –"

Phaedra added, "Wasabi."

"I'll try it." Then Drew walked away.

"I think your roommate's a little creepy."

"I wouldn't say a little creepy. I would say humongously creepy."

"I hope he's not following us around."

"Oh he probably is but he's harmless like dandruff flakes that gather around a shirt collar. Don't worry. I'm ninety percent sure he's not a psycho killer.

"What about the other ten percent?"

"Well, I admit, he has issues. He's an artist, so by definition, he must be a little crazy."

"Artist?"

"Yep. He's got a talent for drawing." Then I noticed the Turkish table. I grabbed Phaedra's hand and led her to that table, "Hey, let's try a Turkish gyro."

We stood next to a stainless steel metal cart with a massive, conical chunk of chicken turning, hissing and singeing on a vertical rotisserie. A rivulet of grease and chicken juices trickled down to the base.

"Two gyros please."

The guy nodded and sliced several slivers of meat from the bottom part of the meat cone, and then he placed the meat on pita bread and added tomatoes, cucumbers, and a drizzle of cucumber sauce.

I noticed the guy put more meat in one gyro, and, of course, handed that one to Phaedra. But that's okay.

I bit into my gyro – my taste buds came alive as the food waltz across my tongue.

Phaedra garbled, “hmmmm.”

“I know. This is definitely not cafeteria food. I wish we had International Food Festival every week. Then we’ll be living the good life as students. Of course, I would never graduate and leave this food behind.”

I turned to gyro guy, “May I please have another gyro but with no vegetables and sauce?”

The guy just stood there as if he didn’t hear me even though three feet separated us.

“C’mon man. I’d like another gyro, please.”

Phaedra bumped into me with her hip and said, “You oughtta use the bathroom, okay?”

“Thank you,” so I headed to the bathroom, walked inside and washed my hands. When I came out, Phaedra stood near the bathroom entrance holding a monstrous sandwich with roasted chicken meat spilling out. I bet that gyro had enough meat to make five sandwiches.

“Wow. That’s quite a sandwich. Man, he’s sure has taken a liking to you?”

“No, I don’t think so. You just didn’t ask properly.”

“Ah, so that’s your secret.”

I grabbed the sandwich and wrapped the paper around tighter so none of the meat would fall out.

“Aren’t you going to eat it, or you saving it for later?”

“It’s not for me. It’s for my friends.”

“Friends?”

“C’mon, I’ll show you.” We walked outside.

“Who’re your friends?”

“It’ll be better to show you.”

“Where we going?”

“Math-Sciences Building.”

“You have friends in that building?”

"No. They don't live inside."

"Then where do they live?"

"It's difficult to explain. It's better that I'll show you."

We approached the Math-Science Building and walked past the entrance.

Phaedra stopped at the entrance and just stood there. She pointed at the glass doors, "Isn't this where we're supposed to go?"

"Nope." I pointed at the large, thick bushes on the side of the building, "My friends live there."

"In there? Let me guess, you are feeding the homeless people who live in the bushes?"

"I sure am."

I walked to one of the bushes while Phaedra trailed behind me, staying at least ten feet away. She made sure she would have a head start if I pulled an ax or machete out of the bushes.

I unwrapped the gyro and placed it on the ground by my feet. "Kittens. Kittens."

Discordant meow sounds came from inside the bush.

Six bright blue eyes appeared at the base of the bush.

I crouched on the ground and looked at Phaedra, "Please stay there. They may be afraid of you."

Three kittens ran to the chicken gyro and began eating. One kitten growled at the other two, as it grabbed a large chunk of meat in its mouth and dragged it closer to the bush.

I picked up one kitten and started petting him and I looked at Phaedra, "Hey Phaedra. I believe this little guy wants to meet your acquaintance." Using my hand, I wave the kitten's front paw at Phaedra.

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"I'm afraid."

“Oh come on. You’re a hundred times his size. He can’t hurt you.”

Phaedra strolled to me while the other two kittens on the ground ran and hid inside the bush.

“Come on,” I urged. “You two have the same eye color, chatoyant baby blues.”

Phaedra reached for the kitten and started petting the furry kitten while the kitten began purring and Phaedra began smiling. Phaedra became an ailurophile.

“I found them when I was walking to class. Every day, I steal a little chicken or fish from the cafeteria and place it under the bush for them.”

“They’re so cute.”

I put the kitten on the ground, and he ran for the bush. Then I bent over and placed the gyro under the bush.

Phaedra and I started walking towards downtown.

“What’ll happen to the kittens when winter comes?”

“Don’t worry. I’ll come for them and take them to my dorm room.”

“But the dorms forbid pets. You can get into serious trouble.”

“I know.” I reached over and held Phaedra’s hand. “Sometimes a man has to break a few rules, especially when it serves the greater good.”

I did return for the kittens one night in December when a thick snow pelted the ground, but the three kittens were gone. I hoped someone gave them a happy home filled with love, furniture to paw and scratch, and plenty of dark corners and closets to explore.

We walked along fraternity row holding hands as drunk college students wandered from house to house. Then we approached town and walked by this old-fashioned coffee shop – an old mom and pop operation with real wooden floors, wooden display cases, counters, and tables from the

50s. I marveled at the white crown molding forming curves and circles on a yellow pastel ceiling.

I stopped. "Let's check this place out."

We went inside and sat at a table in a dark corner, where we could get a little privacy.

"What'd ya like?"

"Something chocolatey."

I went to the counter and looked at the chalk menu mounted on the back wall behind the cash register.

The barista asked, "What'd you like?"

"I'll take a hazelnut cappuccino please, and something else."

"Such as?"

"I don't know. Could you recommend something chocolatey?"

"Would you like a Frappuccino? Caffe Mocha? Chocolate milkshake?"

"Yes, the chocolate milkshake sounds good. I think that'll do."

I paid for the drinks and sat down.

Phaedra asked, "So what'll you do after you graduate?"

"I plan to start my own business and give people sound financial advice. I'll help them invest their money and plan for their retirement."

"I think I heard that before."

"My final goals have not changed, but sometimes I must alter my daily struggle to still get there. What about you?"

"My dad wants me to enroll in law school and work as an attorney."

"That's cool. But your dad works in a university. I heard universities are the easiest employers to work for. Why don't you follow your dad and become a professor?"

"He says the profession is changing. He says the -"

The barista brought our drinks to the table and placed them in the center.

I said, "Thank you, miss, but I could've brought the drinks myself and saved you the trouble."

The barista said "No problem." Then she walked away.

"Aren't you polite?" Phaedra said.

"Why not? Perhaps I was the bright spot in her daily, dreary day after she served hundreds of rude customers."

"She probably thinks you're flirting with her."

"I see your point. But after working a tough summer, I came to appreciate people working in menial jobs. Then dealing with rude people all day can make the job ten times worse."

"What kind of work did you do?"

"I was a manager's assistant."

"Really? Where did you work?"

"I worked in a fast pace environment – millions of things to do every day. No pats on the back for a job well done. No thank you at the end of the day as I crawled to my car. So, I left that career behind to pursue my education. I even joined the university press as a reporter."

"That rag."

"I take it you're not a connoisseur of fine writing?"

"Nope."

"Perhaps I can change that."

"Well, I saw your story. You've changed the world all right. Many students are furious with you."

"I'll admit that story was not my finest."

"Why did you write it?"

"At the time, I thought it was a great idea, but it blew back into my face."

A male customer left the coffee shop carrying a laptop briefcase.

I scanned the empty room. I didn't even see the barista. "It's looks like we're the last customers here."

I looked into Phaedra's eyes. I'm not sure who initiated it, but we leaned towards each other and shared a kiss.

The barista returned to the coffee shop through the back door carrying a trashcan. Then she headed to the kitchen.

We kissed again.

The barista came to the room and grabbed the dishes and trash and returned to the kitchen. Then she came into the dining area and started wiping the tables.

I looked at my watch and asked, "Should I walk you home?"

"Okay."

I pulled a five-dollar bill out of my pocket and slid half the bill under my empty coffee cup. I also accidentally pulled out my skeleton key.

"What's that?" Phaedra asked.

I opened my hand and let Phaedra grab the key, "It's my lucky key. A voodoo priest blessed this key and imbued with a special power - it can unlock any door."

"Really? Where'd you get it?"

"I found it on a playground when I was a little boy."

"Can I have it?"

"Sorry. It's my lucky key. It has protected me since childhood. If you take it, then I will be lost in a world full of locked doors."

Phaedra stuck it in her pocket.

"Can I have my key back, please?"

"Noooooope. Finder keepers losers weepers."

"I see. I think I heard that one before."

We rose and left the coffee shop and started walking towards Phaedra's home while we held hands.

We crossed the metallic blue suspension bridge that divided the town into two equal halves. We crossed to the other side of the river.

“Where do you live?”

“On Ontario Street.”

Phaedra led me across the road and up a stone staircase that led up a tall hill with tall stone walls on both sides.

“Where does this go?”

“It’s a short cut.”

When we reached the first level, Phaedra leaned against the wall.

I slipped my hands around her waist and held her. I felt her inviting warmth, and we kissed, kissed, and kissed. As we’re locked in a kiss, I slipped my hand into her pocket and grabbed my skeleton key and also pulled something else out.

I looked into my hand. “Where did this come from? Why do you have a spoon in your pocket?”

Phaedra stared at me and shrugged her shoulders.

“Wait. This must be from the coffee shop.”

I slipped the spoon and skeleton key into my pocket. I’ll just slip the spoon into the mailbox at the coffee shop when I return home.

We kissed again and again and again.

I said, “It’s getting late.”

“I know.”

We kissed some more while a zephyr blew and tried to cool our passions.

I heard the footsteps of someone coming up the stairs. I pulled away from Phaedra as a jogger sprinted by. I looked down at the city sprawled in front of my eyes, “You can see the whole town from up here.”

“Mm-hmm.”

Her lips looked inviting, and we kissed some more.

My phone started vibrating. I answered it.

Drew said, "Hey man. How's everything?"

"Everything's fine, Drew."

"How's Phae -"

"Drew,. I'm a little preoccupied at the moment. I must go. I'll talk to you later."

"Okay."

"Later."

Phaedra asked, "Is mom calling?"

"No, it wasn't mom. Unfortunately, it was my roommate."

"Why's he calling you?"

"He wanted some help on a math assignment. I told him I would help him."

"Oh."

"It's getting late. When's your curfew?"

"I don't have a curfew, or at least not tonight."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm house sitting."

"House sitting?"

"My neighbor left town and lets me watch his house."

"Okay. Let me walk you to your neighbor's house then."

We walked the rest of the way up the stairs and over to her neighborhood.

I walked with her up the three steps onto the neighbor's porch. I pulled her to a dark corner away from the glaring porch light, and we kissed again.

I said, "Goodbye."

She reached for her keys, walked to the front door and unlocked it. She turned to glance at me and walked inside.

I noticed she left the door slightly ajar. *Queesting, an offer?*

I stood there for a minute while a heated debate ricocheted back and forth between the good guy and bad guy. Shall I enter or shall I close the door and return home?

Of course brothers, I entered the quiet house, “Phaedra. Phaedra,” but I saw no trace of her. All the lights were turned off on the first floor, but the upstairs hallway light was turned on. I closed the door and tiptoed upstairs, “Phaedra. Phaedra.”

I tapped on each door and opened it slightly, “Phaedra.”

Finally, I tapped on the master bedroom door, opened the door, “Phaedra.”

“Just a minute.”

I just stood there in the doorway holding onto the door.

Then Phaedra came out wearing skimpy pajamas.

“You left the door open downstairs.”

She demurely walked over.

I wrapped my arms around her again and we started kissing and caressing.

I pulled my jacket off and let it fall to the floor. Then we continued kissing. I gradually guided her towards the king size bed with a brown leather backrest.

Phaedra pulled away, “This may not be a good idea.”

“I like holding you in my arms. I like kissing you.” Then we kissed some more as I guided her several more inches towards the bed.

Phaedra pulled away again, “You won’t respect me.”

“I like the sweetness of your luscious lips.” We kissed some more. Then I started kissing the nape of her neck and nibbled on the lobe of her ear.

Phaedra stopped kissing and asked, “Do you love me?”

“I love kissing and caressing you.”

She returned to my arms, and we started kissing again. Finally, we sat on the bed’s edge and continued kissing. Then we gradually lied back while we continued kissing.

I opened her top and started kissing her neck while I used my hands to caress her sides. I kissed her breasts and caressed her thighs. I kissed her belly button.

I slipped my hands into her bottom and caressed her.

As I removed each article of clothing from her warm body, I kissed that part of her body.

After I had made love to Phaedra twice, we fell asleep.

I woke up around four in the morning and, brothers, my throat was parched. All that kissing dehydrated me.

I slipped out of bed and headed downstairs to the kitchen.

I drank a glass of water, washed the glass, and returned it to the dish rack to dry.

I'm not sure why I did it, but I explored the house.

Walking around the house, I saw hints of wealth. An antique French armchair in the living room. A beautifully carved wooden side table with an inlaid glass top.

Entering the study, I saw An Escher drawing hanging on the wall. A massive antique mahogany desk was placed in front of the bay windows. Then I noticed the heavy-duty metal frame that held a cheap-like painting as if the artist painted by numbers.

Approaching the painting. I slid my hand under the painting and the painting swiveled opened to reveal a wall safe.

I laughed. If the owner only knew. He thought he was clever by hiding his valuables in a cheap safe from a do-it-yourself store and concealed with a gaudy painting. The owner didn't know the safe manufacturers put all the thick metal in the front, while a thin metal sheet protected the back. I just had to pry the safe out of the wall and open the back like a tin can.

I stopped myself. Brothers, what am I thinking? I'm not a professional burglar. I just did one minor discretion to help pay for college.

I closed the painting, turned the lights off and returned to the master bedroom to sleep with Phaedra.

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## Chapter 7

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Brothers, what a beautiful walk home with the morning sun rising above the horizon filling the sky with soft reds, oranges, and yellow. I even slipped that spoon into the coffee shop's mailbox as the barista carried out the wicker chairs and placed them around the patio tables. We exchanged *Good mornings* when we saw each other.

I strolled into the dorm' foyer and saw one of the nocturnal dorm rats standing next to the row of student mailboxes. He wore a faded blue t-shirt, jeans covered with small tears and holes, and flip-flops.

Approaching the mailboxes, I said, "Hey," and nodded my head

He glanced in my direction, nodded his head, and rebutted my greeting with, "Hey."

I glanced at my mailbox and saw a letter from the Bursar's Office in large bold letters. I scanned the other mailboxes and noticed half the students received the identical envelopes that rested at an angle in their mailboxes.

Brothers, it seemed I had paid my tuition bill a week ago, but another bill was waiting for me in my mailbox like I had to walk by a street corner with a cheap hooker standing there and blocking my way.

I ripped the bill out of my box and tore it open.

"You got one too?" the dorm rat asked.

I turned and saw he held an identical envelope from the bursar's office. "Yup. The bursar told me the university overcharged me and would return some of my money."

He laughed, "Yeah, right. You sure you got the right letter?"

I unfolded the letter and looked at the account balance at the bottom - one thousand dollars due next week. "Yup. I got the right letter. The university threw in a trip to the Bahamas during Christmas break."

“You must be a superb student.”

“Of course.”

“By the way, Daisy will throw another party tonight. It’ll be killer.”

“I’ll stop by. I think I could use the drink,” I said.

“Later. Gotta go and catch some zzzzz’s.”

I studied the letter again and wondered where my money had gone. I thought I had enough to cover it. Then a thought punched me in the head. A cup of fancy coffee here, a gourmet croissant sandwich there, and, brothers, I don’t have any more money.

I went to my empty room, and Drew must have gone to his early morning class. I saw an identical envelope from the Bursar’s Office lying on Drew’s desk. So curiosity mutilated the cat, and I picked up his letter and read it.

Scholarship. Refund of seven hundred and ten dollars and thirty-five cents. I babbled, “The guy cannot even pass his exams.”

I returned his letter to his desk, exactly the same way I found it.

I grabbed my backpacked, pulled several heavy textbooks out and stuck new ones in, and headed to the financial aid office. My favorite office, right after the driver’s license bureau.

I waited and waited and waited for an eon. I probably wouldn’t see anyone until the glaciers covered North America again during the next ice age. I always love when the secretary always says, “It’ll be a minute.” Yeah, sure. A minute stretched into thirty, but I prepared for this expected contingency and opened my finance textbook and began reading.

After an eternity, the secretary said, “Mr. Krause will see you now.”

"Thank you." I slammed my textbook, stuck it under my arm, and walked to his office.

Mr. Krause sat in his chair hiding his face behind a newspaper while his feet rested on his desk.

I sat down in the armchair. I plopped my textbook onto the floor.

Mr. Krause turned the page on his newspaper.

"Uh ugh." I groaned in an exaggerated voice.

He turned the page of the newspaper again.

"I couldn't have missed them, Mr. Krause. Nice shoes."

Mr. Krause whistled and followed it by, "Unbelievable."

"I think I saw the same pair of shoes on sale at the secondhand store."

"Just a moment."

"Okay. Just take your time. I have all day."

I glanced around his office. Oh brothers, my laugh came out as a sarcastic grunt, when I saw the certificate of the best financial aid officer. Next to the certificate was another certificate for completing training in customer service. Then I saw the trophies for boxing lined up like soldiers on a small bookshelf behind his desk.

He closed the newspaper and slid his feet off the desk. Then he picked up a finger nail file and started picking the dirt from under his fingertips. The curmudgeon did not even look at me one time.

"What can I do for you?" as he continued picking at his fingernails.

I placed the letter from the bursar's office on his desk. He didn't even glance at it. "I received a letter from the bursar's office today."

"It sounds like you owe the university some money. You ought to pay your bill then."

"That's the problem. I don't have any money to pay the bill, sir."

“Then the university will automatically withdraw you from classes next week. You will lose the credit hours and grades that you worked so hard for this semester.”

“But I’ve been studying very hard. Couldn’t the university give me another loan?”

“Unfortunately, the university imposes a strict policy. The university only grants emergency loans at the beginning of the semester.”

“I’ve already paid all my tuition and at least half my room and board.”

“Sorry. No exceptions. You should call your parents and asked them to help you.”

“But, but they can’t. My parents are low in funds. They’re, they’re stuck with a fortune in medical bills.” *Nobber, such a. Come on Jax, catch your breath,* “Besides, I thought I walked into the financial aid office. I thought your job was to help poor struggling students such as myself.”

“Sir, we did help you. “We used the federal government’s formulas, and you received the maximum amount of financial aid that the university can offer.” Then he dropped the finger nail file and placed his hands on the desk and stared at me. His eyes reflected kindness and warmth but his words came out in waves of coldness. “How is your social life?”

“Excuse me?” I slurred as corybantic thoughts gushed through my mind. *Nodgecock, he is!* “What does that have to do with anything?”

“Do you drink alcohol with your friends?”

I grunted a laugh, “Sometimes. Why? Aren’t I allowed to indulge and partake in the social activities of college life?”

“Perhaps you have been drinking too much and spent your financial aid at the wrong establishments.”

“Yeah. The university gave me way, way-“ *Gullgroper!* “Too, too much money.’ *Such an awholehole!* “I probably drank

a case a beer since I came here. That averages about 2 beers a week."

Then he pinched his index finger and thumb together and inhaled imaginary marijuana smoke from an imaginary joint. "What about a little reefer?"

I could tell he was no stranger to reefer madness. I just wanted to stand up, grabbed that stupid award, and hit the anathema's head with it. I stared at him and at this coprolite sculpted into a man. I hoped the heat from my eyes would burn him.

"So do you use drugs?"

"No. Of course not. I don't use drugs. I never looked at drugs. Even if I did, I have no money to buy drugs anyway. I barely received enough money from the financial aid office to survive on."

"According to our formulas, you have plenty of financial aid to pay for your school. I can only assume your funding went somewhere. Where did it go?"

"Oh, you got me. Damn, those monthly payments on the BMW costs me a fortune." *Mother cockchafer, oh you!* "I splurged my financial aid and drive around campus in -"

"We are done here."

I remain defiant. I know he wants me to go, but my sarcastic mouth refused to stay shut. It has a mind of its own and always wants the last word. I relaxed deeper into my chair and stared at him. "I thought the financial aid office was supposed to help students."

"You have been helped. We cannot help you anymore, and I also do not appreciate your sarcasm."

"I don't want to sound rude, but how'd you get that award for best financial aid officer?"

Mr. Krause continued staring at me.

"Okay. Fair enough. You're such a mindless myrmidon of the government.' I bent down to pick up my book. As I

stood up and approached the door, my defiant voice continued. I turned and glared at Mr. Krause, “I guess I’ll go rob a bank. That way, the university will get its money.”

“Good luck,” he said as he reached for his newspaper again and rested his feet on the desk.

Brothers, I, finally, understood the financial aid office. The world overflows with contradictions and conundrums – the financial aid office helps financially poor students afford college. The state employment agency helps the unemployed find good paying jobs. The politicians represent the people. Yeah right. I realized the real function of the financial aid officer – try to squeeze as much money as possible from every student. The universities are as greedy as those Wall Street Bankers. They know, students will find a way to pay. Most students always do. Otherwise, the university would have to change their ways. They would have to change their system.

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## Chapter 8

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Oh brothers. I didn't want to do this again, another break-n-take. I had no money, and another tuition bill wrapped itself around my neck and was choking me to death.

I wandered around the downtown on a cloudy afternoon and searched for the next opportunity. Then I spotted a quaint little college bar and restaurant the students called the Library. I walked along the side street to get a closer look. I knew the place served a medley of traditional American and French foods because I took Phaedra there for lunch yesterday. We marveled over the delectable entrees like beef tartar, escargot, liver pate, and French onion soup, and the traditional array of American food such as the juicy-dripping hamburgers and crispy French fries.

I explored the enclosed catwalk that went across street and connected the second floors of the Library to the building across the street. I smiled as I walked up the steps to the second floor and stared at a massive mosaic window. My opportunity lied on the other side of that window. Brothers, I knew this job would be easy, such as stealing coins from an ashtray of a rusty old car abandoned at the junkyard.

I returned to the dorm room. I feigned a stomachache, so Drew would stop pestering me about Daisy's approaching party, which was quite unfortunate because Daisy threw some of the craziest parties on campus. But brothers, if I were lucky, Drew would be passed out on Daisy's dirty, sticky carpet covered with empty beer cans and discarded food containers by the time I returned to the dorm room.

I snuck out from the dorm room around midnight wearing clothes I bought at a second-hand store. I walked to downtown while drunk college students staggered along the

sidewalks here and there, polluting the air with their drunken songs and past female conquests.

I approached the enclosed catwalk from the other side of the street and walked up to the second floor and crossed the catwalk to the other side. Then I stopped at the mosaic window – my secret entrance to the Library.

I peered through one of the translucent panes and saw dim lights here and there that illuminated the aisles around the dark tables and bar. All the bar stools were stacked on the bar while all the chairs were pushed under the tables.

Slipping on my gloves, and popping out a small windowpane from the mosaic, I flipped the sash lock open. The windowpane popped out and fell onto the cushioned seat of a large U-shaped booth. I opened the window and crawled inside until my hands hit the booth's seat cushion while my legs stuck up through the window. Then I slid in. I rose and closed the window but left it unlocked.

I tiptoed to the door of the manager's office next to far corner of the bar.

I gripped the doorknob in my hand and turned it, and the door swung open.

I tipped toed inside and closed the door behind me. I pulled out my phone and switched on the flashlight.

I went to the antique wooden desk and opened each drawer and shined the light as I sorted through every paper and document. *Humpenscrump!* After slamming the last drawer closed, I mumbled, "Shit, where's the money?"

I looked up and noticed two metal filing cabinets standing five feet tall. I approached the cabinets, and I pulled out one drawer and another and then another. Just more files and documents. *Tetheradick, such is?* Out of frustration, I turned and bumped into an end table covered with a thick tablecloth. Thump!

I rubbed my knee, "What the fuck?" I kicked the end table, but it didn't bulge. I knocked on the tabletop several times - knock, knock, knock, and a metallic ring echoed through the air.

I lifted a corner of the tablecloth and revealed an ancient safe that stood at least three feet high and two feet thick, and, it had a foot-long lever and a large black dial with faded numbers and tick marks. Brothers, it was a beaut.

I released the tablecloth and pushed against the safe. It stood firm and resisted my struggles. But it wouldn't matter anyway. The safe had to weigh a thousand pounds - no way would I be dragging this thing home.

I went around the room and straightened things, so the restaurant owner would not suspect anything when he came the next day to open the restaurant. I left the office and returned to the mosaic window.

I couldn't see them, but their drunken arguments echoed up the catwalk and into the bar. They walked along the street below. I waited until their arguing vanished into the murky night.

I found the windowpane, where it snapped into two pieces. I carefully slipped them into my jacket pocket.

I opened the window, crawled out head first, and dropped to the floor below. Then I closed the window and secured the latch on the sash.

I walked to the other end of the catwalk and hopped down the stairs. Lucky for me, the 24-7 convenience store was only three blocks away.

I picked the most expensive scotch tape and placed it on the counter in front of the cashier.

The cashier didn't even look at me. He grabbed the tape rang up the sale, "That'll be three-fifty."

I pulled out four bones and passed it to him.

You think he would at least look at me. Who in the fuck buys scotch tape one o'clock in the morning?

I returned to the Library and went up the catwalk. I taped the two pieces of the windowpane together and then tape the windowpane back into its proper place.

I stood several feet away and examined my work. Brothers, you would be impressed with my job. Someone would have to stand next to the window before he or she would spot my master rigging.

I returned to the dorm room. And the good news is Drew didn't even stir as I came in. I undressed and crawled between the sheets in my bed.

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The next morning, Drew while lying on his bed propped himself on the elbow and looked over at me. He asked, "Dude. You've got any aspirin?"

"Sorry, but the pharmacy's closed."

"You've missed a bitchin party last night."

"Unfortunately, my stomach needed a break. No way could I join you guys for a little drink."

"So what happened to you last night?"

"I spent a little personal time with my girl."

"Are you sure? Are you still with the same girl? I saw her at the party."

Well brothers, here's where being a good poker comes in handy. I wanted to scream 'what the hell is Phaedra doing at a party with a bunch of drunken degenerates and social misfits?' Instead, I said, "Well. She went, but we met after the party."

"Oh. I'm not implying anything, but she was surrounded by dudes."

"I know she can be a little friendly. I will talk to her about it."

Drew rubbed his head, "Dude, my head hurts."

"I'm on my way to class, but I'll tell you what. I'll stop by the student union after class and pick some aspirin up for you."

"Thanks dude." Then Drew laid down and fell asleep.

I went to my morning class. After class, I stopped at the student union for some coffee, and I did buy several some packets of aspirin. Then I headed to the computer lab and found a vacant workstation towards the back where someone forgot to log off.

Shaking my head, I sat down. That person even left his browser open with his email account opened on one tab. Brothers, I thought wouldn't it be funny to send a naughty email to his friends, or maybe email Dean Tremaine and the university president and tell them what I thought of them via vicariously through a stranger. But brothers, that would be wrong. I had other pressing issues like that tuition bill. I closed the browser, reopened it, and surfed to YouTube.

I found a YouTube video, where a guy with a goatee and a long pony tail showed how he break a safe open within two minutes using a long crowbar. Ironically, the safe's dimensions roughly matched the safe in the library. I watched with full attention as the guy wedged a three-foot crowbar into the upper lip of the door. Then he used his body to apply force to the crowbar and worked the crowbar back and forth while the safe's lips opened a little.

He moved to a new spot farther down, and worked the safe while the lips opened a little more. He pulled back and forth, back and forth. Finally, the safe's lips revealed a crooked smile.

The guy proceeded to the safe's side where the three stainless steel bars slid across the safe's door that locked the

door. The metal to the safe's door peeled back a little, and the door popped open.

I watched several more Youtube videos, where various people of dubious nature showed how quickly one could open a metal safe.

Now I thought, where do I get a three-foot long crowbar?

After my last lecture for the day, I dropped the aspirin in the dorm room and left it on Drew's desk. Then I walked to the salvage yard, a mass graveyard of ancient rusting relics on the other side of town.

I walked through the seven-foot high, metal mesh gate and walked between rows of old rusty cars stacked on top of each other three cars high. I peered into the distance. The labyrinth of wrecked cars stretched at least a mile.

I entered a large metal warehouse, where grease covered the floors while engines and transmissions laid at random places everywhere. Along the back of the building, large metal shelves reached the ceiling with every shelf overflowing with old dirty parts.

I walked to the office.

A customer was arguing with the clerk. "C'mon man. I need that part for fifteen."

"I said twenty."

They both turned to glance at me. Then they returned to haggling.

The customer picked up the part, "Lookie here. Part's old. It's been used."

"Then you git and go n buy somewhere else."

"But Tom, you're eating into me's profits."

"Just charge double for that part."

"I want to. But I want the customer to come back too."

"But fifteen's too low. I needing make profit too."

"Okay, okay. Here's your twenty." The customer pulled out a brand new twenty and handed it to the clerk."

"Thank you Fred, for your business."

"We're still goin fishing this weekend?"

"Yup. I'll bring a case of coldies."

"You do that. Make sure it's Budweiser. Not that Milwaukee crap."

The customer left, and the clerk stared at me, "What do I do you for?"

"I'm looking for a crowbar," I stretched my hands outward, "About his long."

"What'da need it for?"

"Renovating a house."

The clerk squinted his left eye and scratched his chin. "Whatcha going to do?"

"I'm taking out the drywall between the family and living rooms."

The clerk answered, "Oh, I think I may have something." Then he disappeared into the warehouse.

Memories flooded my mind. I remember my mom stayed at grandma's house for the weekend while dad and I renovated the house. I helped my dad scoot a couch and end table away from the wall that divided the living and family rooms.

We went to the other side of the wall and moved a desk.

My dad and I laid large, old bedsheets on both sides of the wall.

My dad yelled, "Pull it tight, boy. That way, cleanup be easy. And no dust will get on the floor."

The fun started. I picked up a hammer and started bashing the drywall while the drywall cracked and broke. Small pieces began falling to the floor onto the bed sheets. In

several places, the drywall clung to the wall, refusing to fall to the floor.

Dad picked up a crowbar, “Lookie here, boy. Just shove the crowbar between the stud and drywall. Then push back and forth.” A chunk of drywall fell to the ground.

He passed the crowbar to me. I shoved it between another piece of drywall and the stud. I pushed in and out, but the chunk didn’t move.

“Here. Hold your hands at the end of the crowbar. Apply more leverage.”

I moved my hands to the crowbar’s end and pushed and pulled back and forth, and a chunk of drywall fell to the floor.

After removing another piece, my dad said, “Just think. If you have a crowbar long enough, you could move the world.”

“Move the world? That would be cool.”

“Move the world,” I mumbled as the clerk returned to the room holding a rusty crowbar.

“Here you go,” as he placed it on the counter.

I grabbed the crowbar and inspected it. “It looks like this thing has been around for a while, at least a century.”

“Yes sir. And it’s yours for twenty.”

“Twenty? Oh, come on. You probably found this lying on the ground somewhere around back. How about ten?”

The clerk shook his head no. “Twenty.”

“But I can go to a store and buy a new one for thirty.”

“Then you just do that. You git. Go to that store and buy a spanking brand new crowbar made in China. This one here is made in the good ole USA. With real American steel.”

“But it’s too short.”

"I'll you what, I throw in a metal pipe too." He reached down and picked up a two-foot metal pipe and placed it on the table.

I picked up the pipe and inserted the crowbar into the end of the pipe.

"See, you've got at least four feet."

"How about fifteen for everything."

"Nope. Twenty. I'll throw in the pipe for free."

I knew it would be useless to haggle with this guy. He wouldn't even bargain with his fishing buddy. I reached into my pocket and pulled out two crumpled tens.

"Thank you kindly."

I slid the crowbar and pipe into my backpack. I shook my head back and forth because the pipe and crowbar jutted out from the backpack at least six inches.

I left the building and looked around at the ancient relics. I betcha I could find some interesting things here along a nightly stroll while holding a flashlight.

On the way out, I spotted a paper bag lying on the ground. I picked it up and shook the dust and dirt off it. Then I slipped the bag over the pipe and crowbar to conceal them.

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I woke up one in the morning. Drew was in a deep sleep, snoring.

I slipped out of bed and slipped on those old, ragged clothes from the second-hand store. I also slipped a change of clothes into my backpack.

I grabbed my backpack and removed the heavy textbooks and pads of yellow paper. I reached under the bed covers and pulled out my crowbar and pipe and slid them

into the backpack with them jutting out. Then I slipped the brown paper bag over the tops of the crowbar and pipe.

I headed out and reached the Library within thirty minutes. I entered the entrance to the enclosed catwalk on the other side of the street and crossed over to the Library's side.

I looked around. No one lurked around on a Wednesday night. The frat boys must be past out, granting their livers a little mercy from the ravaging alcohol.

Reaching the mosaic window, I slid my gloves onto my hands and pulled the tape off the windowpane. I reached inside and unlatched the window and opened it. I tossed the pane of glass onto the cushioned seat of the booth, which caught and muffled the sounds of the windowpane.

I tossed my backpack onto the booth seat, climbed in head first, and closed the windows.

I grabbed my backpack and tiptoed to the office. I opened the office door slowly and entered the dark room. Then I closed the door. Turning on my cell phone's flashlight, I approached the safe. I pulled the tablecloth off the safe and tossed it into the corner.

I took off my backpack and removed the pipe and crowbar and placed the instruments on top of the safe.

I used my index finger to trace the lip of the safe's door.

Crash! It sounded like someone fired a canon inside the office. *Skiddy-cock!* I ran to the door opened it and raced to the window. I laid down on the seat of the booth.

Once my beating heart slowed, I rose and returned to the office. I saw my phone on the floor with the flashlight still on while the light was dimming. I picked up my cell phone, turned off the flashlight, and slipped it into my pocket.

I turned on the office light and spotted the culprit. The pipe rolled off the safe and hit the floor. I went to work. I

slipped the crowbar into the top lip of the safe near the top hinge and slipped the pipe onto the top of the crowbar.

I pushed and pulled, back and forth several times while the safe's lip bent out slightly.

I kept pushing and pulling, but the lips remained sealed.

I jumped onto the top of the safe and continued pushing and pulling, back and forth for several minutes while I threw my body weight behind the crowbar.

The safe's lips opened a little more.

I slid the crowbar down several inches and continued pushing and pulling. Then I slid the crowbar father down and continued.

After fifteen minutes of dripping sweat and exhausted muscles, I peeled the upper lip on the safe. It looks like it would take much longer than two minutes, but it's not like I would film a video and post it onto YouTube.

I continued praying and prying and moving along the safe's lips until I worked on the area where the bars slid across the safe. Finally, after thirty minutes, the safe's door opened slightly. After another twenty minutes of exhaustion and sweat, the safe's door squeaked opened.

I dropped the crowbar and pipe onto the floor and slipped on my gloves. Then I kneeled and opened the door all the way.

I pulled out folders and documents until I came across a manila envelope. I tore it opened and revealed a stack of cash and checks. I dumped the envelope's contents onto the floor and sorted the cash from the checks. Then I shoved the money into my pocket. Making sure I didn't miss anything, I shoved the crowbar and pipe onto my backpack, and fitted the paper bag over them. I slung the backpack over my shoulder.

My phone started ringing, and I pulled it out - Phaedra was calling.

I answered, "Hey girl. How are you?"

"I'm fine. What're doing?"

"Oh, not too much. Just writing my essay for English."

"Really. I just wanted to know. Do you miss me?"

"Of course. I miss holding you in my arms, I miss the sweetness of your lips. I miss -"

"Do you want to come over?"

"Oh, I really want to see you. But this English assignment. I must finish it by tomorrow."

"Ah. That's a pity."

"You know. This assignment is not that important. How about we meet in an hour?" Of course, I thought if I'm not in jail by then.

"Okay. Just come to my neighbor's house."

"I'll see you shortly."

"Bye."

"Bye."

I slipped the phone into my pocket. I rose, shut the light off, and entered the bar area. Brothers, would you believe my cell phone started ringing again. "What the fuck?" I mumbled.

I pulled out my phone, "Hello."

"Hey Jax. Where are you?" Drew asked.

"Hey dude. I'm a little busy at the moment."

"What're doing?"

"I'm entertaining a certain female species."

"Oh, cool. Do you think she can hook me up with one of the friends?"

"Let me ask her. And I'll get back to you, okay."

I hung up and returned the phone to my pocket. I went behind the bar and grabbed a can of coke. I flipped the tab back and popped it open. I gulped the entire contents in one gulp. Then I slip the empty can into my backpack. I grabbed another coke and slipped it into my backpack as well.

I approached the window and looked out. A dense fog covered the landscape.

I opened the window, climbed onto the booth, and was ready to jump out. Then I remembered the glass pane that was taped together. I looked around for it and saw a reflection on the booth's seat. I grabbed it and slipped into my backpack as well.

I climbed onto the booth's seat and jumped out the window head first. Then I turned around and closed the window but did not latch it. Besides, the owner will know he was robbed tomorrow anyway.

I pulled off my gloves and tucked them into my jacket pockets. Then I peeled the remaining scotch tape from the window. I slipped that ball of used scotch tape into my jacket pocket. I almost turned to leave and then remembered to use my coat sleeve to wipe any incriminating fingerprints off the window.

I walked along the catwalk and descended the stairs on the other side. I avoided the main road that cut through the center of town. I turned right and then left and walked along a side street that followed along the river. Occasionally, glittering twinkles of light from the river filled the empty spaces between the buildings.

Two blocks ahead, flashing red lights cut through the darkness.

I turned left at the next alley and ducked behind a corner.

"Buddy, could you spare some change?"

"What?" Then I looked down.

Two white eyes stared up at me.

A homeless man stretched out an opened hand. "Please. I'm hungry."

I slipped my hand into my front pocket and pulled a bill out and handed it to him.

“Thanks buddy.”

I peered around the corner, and the neighborhood became dark again.

I walked along the desolate street and approached the suspension bridge that connected the two halves of the city. I climbed a steep hill to main street and walked on the sidewalk onto the bridge.

I walked to the mid-point and looked around.

Approaching headlights sliced through the darkness while the car rattled from the heavy bass of rap music.

I watched as it drove by while four shadowy faces stared back at me. Perhaps, they thought they would watch a Wednesday show as a depressed student plunged to their death from the bridge. Sorry brothers, but tonight is not the night, or at least I’m not jumping.

Once the music faded into the night, I slipped off my backpack. I crumpled the brown paper bag and tossed it into the river. Then I pulled the crowbar and pipe out and tossed them into the dark waters below.

Plopped.

Then I pulled out the windowpane with scotch tape holding it together. I let it slide from my hands into the water.

Plunked.

I grabbed the can of coke and pulled the tab back. Oh brothers, the sweet song of the soda’s fizzle beckoned me. I drank a large swallow. I swung the backpack on my shoulder and walked to the other side of the bridge to meet Phaedra.

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Eight o’clock the next morning, my cell phone rings. I bolted up and looked around at the unfamiliar

surroundings. Then I saw my cellphone on a nightstand and answered in a groggy voice, "Hello."

"Jax, I got a hot story for you to cover."

"Who's this?"

"David. You need to get going, okay."

"Oh David. Ok shoot."

"A person or persons broke into the Library last night."

"No way? So some students stole some library books?"

"Not the college library. The Library Bar and Grill."

"No kidding?"

"I need you to cover the story."

"What'da I do?"

"Go down to the Library and talk to the owner and police. Ask as many questions as you can."

"Okay. I can do that."

Phaedra mumbled, "Who's that?"

"Someone broke into the Library last night."

"Someone stole –" Phaedra stretched her arms and legs, shifted her weight, tucked her head between two pillows, and started snoring again.

I bent over to kiss her on the top of her head and watched her solemn face for a moment. *Sleep my tuqburni*. Then I hopped out of the bed, went into the bathroom, and locked the door. I pulled the money out of my front jean's pocket and counted it – two thousand three-hundred and twenty-two dollars. I smiled. The dormitory food was playing havoc on my insides, so I would grant my stomach a reprieve and eat out for a change. Of course, I can afford to take my girl with me too.

I opened the bathroom door slowly and stuck part of my head out. Phaedra was still snoring. I closed the door. I divided the money into two stacks, jamming each stack into an empty front jeans pocket.

I showered, dressed, put on fresh clothes from my backpack, and went outside. I saw a sanitation truck turn onto Phaedra's street. I tossed my old clothes and two cans of coke into a neighbor's trash bin and walked to downtown as fog shrouded the buildings and trees. It felt surreal approaching the Library Bar as if I had dreamed my misdeed.

As I turned the corner and approached, two police cars were parked in front of the bar while two police officers stood on the sidewalk by the bar's entrance and chatted to each other. One pointed at things and then he scribbled something in his notebook.

I walked to the bar's entrance.

"Excuse me. The bar's closed."

"Hi, I work for the university newspaper."

The officer holding the notebook walked in another direction while the other officer approached me."

"What's your name?"

"Jax."

"Jax what?"

"Jax Gamble."

"Do you have I.D.?"

"I.D for what? I'm writing a newspaper article."

"Sir. I need to see your I.D.?"

I pulled out my student I.D. and handed it to the officer. He studied it for a minute and passed it back.

"What happened here?"

"A crime."

"Thank you sir. I don't think I need Sherlock Holmes to tell me that one. But what kind of crime?"

"A burglary."

"Do you have any suspects?"

"We're following several leads. The suspects will be apprehended."

"Who are the suspects?"

"That information cannot be disclosed at this time."

"Okay. How much was stolen?"

"That cannot be disclosed until after the investigation is over."

The other officer with the notepad came over. "I'll take over. I'm Detective Anderson."

We shook hands. I asked, "Can I quote you?"

"Of course."

"How much was stolen?"

"Just a little over two thousand dollars."

"What time did the crime take place?"

"We believe somewhere between two and five this morning."

"How did the criminals enter the building?"

"They forced the back door opened."

"Do you have any suspects?"

"We are following several leads."

"What can you say about the suspects?"

"We cannot release any details. However, we believe a burglary ring has set up shop in our small town."

"A burglary ring? In this tiny town?"

The detective nodded his head.

Just then, a small, middle-aged man with thinning hair wearing spectacles and a brown leather coat slammed the front door shut of the Library Bar. He clenched his teeth and squinted his eyes as he glared at us. Then he stomped away.

I nodded my head in the man's direction, "The owner, I presume?"

The detective nodded his head in affirmative. Then he said, "I must return to work."

I ran to the owner. As I approached, he turned to look at me."

“Hi, my name is Jax, and I work for the university newspaper.”

He stared at me.

“Can you tell me how much was stolen?”

The owner shook his index finger at me, “The police will catch those dirty bastards.”

“I understand your anger. I am here to help. Perhaps my news story will lead to the capture of those criminals. How did they break in?”

“I’ll offer a thousand dollar reward to anyone who can identify those thieves.”

I whistled. Then I added, “Wow. A thousand bucks. How did the thieves break into the bar?”

The owner yelled, “Not now.” He turned and walked away.

I pulled out my phone and called David, “Guess what. I have a front page story for you.”

“That’s great.”

“It’ll be a small article – few words.”

“Well, it’s a small newspaper in a little town.”

I slipped the phone into my front jean’s pocket. While looking down, I spotted a ball of used scotched tape. I turned to look at the officers who were busy inspecting the area.

I reached down and grabbed that ball of tape.

“What’d you find there?” The detective yelled as he ran to me.

I stuck the ball of tape under my notepad and held up the pen and shook it. “I dropped my pen onto the ground.”

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## Chapter 9

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Phaedra invited me to the honors banquet for the top business students. Brothers, I'm not even there for five minutes, and I rammed against a nerd blockade at the door.

A nerd stood in front of the door to the dining hall. "Only top students of the university can enter here. I don't think you're a top student."

"How do you know. You don't even know me. I was given the invitation today."

"What's your name?"

"Jax Gamble."

Another nerd sitting behind a table leafed through a list of names with his index finger. "I don't see his name here."

"How can that be?"

"Do you have an invitation?"

"Of course." I reached into my front jean's pocket and pulled out a fancy vanilla envelope that I had folded several times. I unfolded the envelope and pulled out the invitation and handed it to the nerd standing in front of the door.

The guy examined the invitation. Then he held it up to the light. "It's looks genuine."

"What do you mean genuine? Of course it's genuine." I crossed my two fingers, "The dean and I are close, real close."

The nerd passed it to his twin, who examined it carefully. "It looks real. Perhaps we should ask the Dean."

I said, "Go ahead. He's the one who handed it to me this afternoon." I pointed to the Dean's signature, "He even signed it."

The nerd blocking the dining hall door shrugged his shoulders and gasped. Then he stepped away from the door to let me pass.

"Thanks guys."

I slipped the invitation into its envelope, folded it again along the original crease lines, and slipped it into my pocket.

Brothers, I entered through the dining hall doors wearing my finest threads – a maroon long-sleeve dress shirt and dark blue dress pants. They looked new because I rarely wore them as they spent most of their life hanging in the closet. When I was ready to wear them, I would just throw them into a dryer for five minutes with a bounce sheet or hang them out the window on their hangers for a couple hours in the spring air.

Of course, the faded blue sneakers matched my superb garb quite well.

As I walked through the door, the Dean glanced in my direction. He frowned and turned away. Then I saw Phaedra standing with a group of students.

I approached her and touched her elbow lightly.

She turned in my direction, “Hi.”

“Hey. I haven’t seen you in a while. I didn’t expect to see you here?”

“Well, you know my dad. I must go to all the fancy social functions.”

“There’s nothing wrong with that.”

“Have you met my father?”

“I don’t think I have.”

Phaedra turned to her group, “Please excuse us.” Then Phaedra grabbed my hand, “C’mon.” The next thing I knew, I was standing face to face with the Dean.

The Dean ignored me as he chatted with several professors.

“Hi daddy.”

The Dean turned in our direction.

“Hi sweet pea.”

“I want you to meet Jax.”

The Dean crinkled his nose when he looked at me. He took a minute before extending his hand for a handshake, "Young man, I believe we have met before."

I reached for his hand and shook his cold sweaty hand. "Yes, we have. You remember the interview for the newspaper article."

"I must say that was quite a splendid piece."

"Of course. Thank you for the chance to interview you and the wealth of information you provided me."

"Daddy, this is the one I've been telling you about."

He pointed at me, "This is the young man you spoke highly of?"

"Yes, daddy."

The Dean frowned but a fake smile quickly appeared on his face. I guess he must put on a show in front of his colleagues.

The Dean stared at me, "My daughter has spoken very highly of you."

"I'm sure she has exaggerated just a little."

"I am sure she has."

Phaedra asked, "Have you seen the art gallery?"

I replied, "The art gallery?"

"C'mon, I'll show you."

I looked at the Dean and the faculty, "Good day gentlemen."

"Good day," the Dean replied.

Phaedra and I walked through the double sliding doors and entered the art gallery with a pastiche guarding the door. I studied the pastiche and observed how the artist welded a motley of scrap metal and refuse into an octopus-like humanoid. Then I spotted the oil paintings that spanned along all the gallery walls with three chiseled marble statues of Greek gods standing in a row along the far wall.

We walked to the first oil painting.

I wrapped my hand around Phaedra's waist, felt the warmth of her body, and whispered into her ear, "Thanks for the invite."

She looked back at me and smiled. "You're welcome. But I thought you didn't know my father?"

"Well, we've bumped into each other once or twice before. We're still forging our friendship. But I hope you don't get into trouble for inviting me."

"Nah. I didn't think he would miss one invitation. He had a whole stack lying on his desk." Then we wrapped our arms around each other and started kissing.

We pulled away to get a little air. Then I read the info card on the oil painting aloud, "1958 The Northern Lights, Derek Thompson. Never heard of him?"

"The university sponsors local artists."

I examined the painting, "It's like the artist just splattered paint onto the canvas."

"But you can see the trees, can't you? Look here." She grabbed my hand and pointed my finger at the objects in the painting, "See the trees' reflection on the lake?" Then she moved my finger up and down. "Those streaks are the northern lights."

"Yah. I think I can see it now. It's like the northern lights march across the canvas, one by one." Brothers, I really didn't see it. I just saw bright paints thrown randomly onto the canvas. I've seen toddlers paint better masterpieces.

I missed the sweetness of her lips, and we started kissing again.

I wasn't sure how long we kissed, but the sliding doors had jerked open.

Phaedra and I split apart. She looked towards the ground while I turned to look to see who had entered the room.

The Dean said, "I hope I am not disturbing you two. Dinner shall be served shortly."

"Okay, thank you, daddy."

Phaedra and I walked towards the sliding double doors with at least a foot separating us while the Dean scrutinized us.

We entered the dining hall and approached the elongated dinner table.

"Jax, I believe your seat is here," the Dean said. Oh, what a surprise, brothers? My spot was at the end of the table while the Dean sat at the head while Phaedra sat to his right.

As everyone at the table made small chatter, I noticed a handsome guy sitting next to Phaedra. Phaedra would occasionally laugh at his jokes and hadn't glanced in my direction for quite a while. It seemed Phaedra and this guy were enjoying their company together, and my girl had completely forgotten about me.

The Dean rose and held his wine glass up, filled with ice water, of course, and tapped the side with a spoon.

"Ladies and gentlemen. Ladies and gentlemen."

The murmurs and small chattering died down.

The Dean started, "I thank you for taking the time to come to this appreciation dinner. As you look around yourselves, you represent the best and brightest of the university, and soon, you shall become the future leaders of our country. With your hard work, courage, and unflinching values, you shall make the School of Business the best in the state. Once you enter the business world and become future leaders, you shall never forget your alma mater and the good things the university has given you. Also, we shall never forget your hard work and achievements. Thus, it gives the faculty and I great please to host this honors banquet. So I give a toast."

The Dean saluted with his wine glass and then he sipped it while everyone followed, even me.

We sat down again. My mouth began watering as the servants pushed the steel carts with the hors d'oeuvres. The servants placed large plates in the center of the table. The first plate overflowed with cocktail shrimp that surrounded a dish filled with cocktail sauce. The next platter had sliced cheeses lying on top of each other in a circle. Then a platter of cured sliced meats with a bowl of paté in the center. Finally, for the vegetarians, a platter of sliced vegetables with ranch dressing in the center.

I grabbed a fork and shoveled meats, shrimp, and cheeses onto my plate. The food was delicious. I also put several shrimp and meats into a napkin that I folded and slipped carefully into my front pants pocket. A little something for my furry little friends living in the bushes near the Science-Math Building.

The servants started placing a white plate with a filet mignon with bacon wrapped around the sides in front of every guest. Then they started removing the empty plates.

I poked the meat with a fork and sliced a chunk off. Once that piece hit my taste buds, I closed my eyes and chewed slowly. Brothers, when food's this good, I savored every bite, and I even forgot about my girl conversing with a handsome guy on the other side of the table. But tomorrow, back to the cruddy food in the cafeteria.

I noticed the nerdy kid come in and handed the Dean a guest list. The Dean browsed through the list. Then he stared at me.

The Dean motioned to the nerdy kid to move nearer and whispered into his ear while the nerdy kid nodded his head up and down.

I felt a bad premonition tingle up and down my spine. I pushed the baked potatoes topped with sour cream and

chives to the side of the plate with my fork. I hurried and sliced the filet mignon in small bites and began shoveling them into my mouth.

As the nerdy kid approached me, I ate faster. I finally finished the steak and moved on to the baked potato.

The nerdy kid bent down and whispered in my ear, "The Dean wants to speak with you in the art gallery."

I nodded my head, "Okay."

Nerdy kid walked away. I grabbed another napkin and filled it cured meats. Then I slipped that napkin into my other pants pocket. I stood up and walked to the gallery.

A minute later, the Dean joined me and closed the doors gently.

The Dean started the conversation, "It seems we cannot find your name on the guest list."

I looked at him and shrugged my shoulders.

"I imagine my daughter had something to do with this little escapade."

"Well, sir. She wanted me to meet you, so how could I say no."

He squinted his eyes and shook his head from left to right, "Good god. I am not sure what my daughter sees in you."

I'm not sure why I did it, but my crouch began itching, so I started to scratch it. "I'm not sure what she sees in me either, but I'm sure she feels, I mean, sees something good."

"You have no culture. No dignity. No respect. No future. No prospects -."

"Hey, hey. Don't be so harsh. I do have a future, but you can't see it beyond your pompous nose. You never know. I may even marry your daughter and give you a litter of grandchildren, dad."

The Dean's complexion reddened as he pointed his finger rudely at me, "I am warning you. I forbid you to see my daughter."

"Sir, what can you do about it? Are you planning to lock up your daughter in the house? That'll never work. You'll chase her into my open arms."

"Ah, are you sure? She seems to be interested in Steve." The Dean pointed towards the dining room table on the other side of the door. "That young man has a future." The Dean started chuckling. "By the end of the week, she shall forget your name."

"We'll see, pops."

"You must leave now. Otherwise, I shall call campus security and have them escort you out of the building."

"Very well then."

I walked past the Dean and opened the sliding doors. I looked at Phaedra and saw her in a deep conversation with Steve.

I turned to the dean, "Thank you sir for the delicious food and splendid conversation." Then I exited the ballroom and walked to the Math-Sciences Building.

I sat on the grass near the bushes and puckered my lips making loud kissing sounds. Next thing I know, three kittens were climbing up and down my lap. I pulled out the two napkins filled with cured meats and shrimp and began feeding my little friends.

\*\*\*

The next day, I met Phaedra at the campus coffee shop at the Student Union. I had my books sprawled out across the table while my backpack occupied a chair.

Phaedra came to my table and stood there, "Hey there."

"Hey right back at you. What're you doing?"

"I'm starving."

"Grab some food then."

She walked to the food counter and stood in line to get a coffee. After ordering, she returned and sat across from me and opened the packaging to her egg salad sandwich.

"I didn't see you leave last night."

"I had to leave early. I had to prepare for a tough exam this Thursday."

"That's too bad."

"How's your dad?"

"Daddy's fine."

"Just let me know if your dad will host another dinner or social function. I think if I meet your dad several more times, we'll forge our eternal friendship."

"I'm not sure. It takes a while for daddy to adjust to new people. Some people think he can be too strict, too reserved."

"Oh, no way. He's just misunderstood. I have a way with people. By the way, who was that guy who sat next to you last night?"

Phaedra turned reddish, dropped her sandwich on the table, and looked away, "That's nobody"

"I think I recognize him. Isn't he the water boy for the hockey team?"

"Water boy. Yeah, right. He's the captain."

"Captain? Ah, that's why. He's always sitting next to the large water dispenser. I guess I got them confused. What did you guys talk about last night?"

Phaedra looked away again, "Nothing."

"I bet you he has a fancy Ford Fiesta."

Phaedra remained quiet.

"Or I bet you he drives a nice spiffy Honda."

"I think it's a Mercedes or something."

Oh, now I knew who this prick was. I've only seen one Mercedes on this campus, and it has to be this dude's. Next time I see it, I'll pick up a rock and hurl it at the car as it speeds by. I answered, "I think I saw that car. It's white, isn't it?"

"I think so. Why? You getting jealous?"

I pointed at myself, "Who me? Maybe just a little. The dude never offered me a ride."

"Perhaps you didn't ask him politely."

I snapped my fingers. "You're right. I've always been rude to the guy." I lifted my knee up to the table and rubbed my thigh, "Next time, I'll just show him a little more leg. Perhaps wiggle my behind. Throw a kiss in his direction."

Phaedra started laughing. Then she added, "He's not gay."

"Are you sure? Maybe he hasn't met the right guy yet."

"Yeah right."

"It doesn't matter anyway. He's not likely to be drafted into the big leagues."

"No, but he has plans."

"Really? What kind of plans?"

"He president of both the debate club and fraternity, and he made the Dean's list every semester."

"That's impressive. You keep talking about him like this, you'll make me gay."

Phaedra started laughing again. Then she stood up, "I gotta go. I've gotta study at the library."

I looked at her half-eaten sandwich, "Aren't you still hungry?"

"No. I'm full now. Bye."

"Bye."

Then she walked away.

The male student sitting at the next table turned to look at me, "Sorry dude, but I think you've lost her."

"Hey stranger, I don't want to sound rude, but you shouldn't eavesdrop on other people's conversation."

"Look, man. I've been there. I ignored all the warning signs until it was too late. I woke up one morning, and she dumped me for this other guy."

"Thanks for your opinion, but I got a backup plan. I'll just shackle her to my bed in the dorm room. That way, she's got no choice."

"Whatever, man."

But the guy was right. Phaedra was falling for the superstar. How could I win her back? Perhaps I could steal Steve's car and sink it in the river. Then an old memory rose from the murky depths of my mind...

Now I remember it all. It makes sense. I had to be around eight or nine, when my dad and his two large buddies went to my mom's work one night. We all sat in a car waiting.

Mom kept talking about this one customer who kept coming in and giving her compliments at the video store, where my mom was the shift manager. Then mom started dressing nicer and dabbed a little more makeup before work. She even started to go to work earlier.

Dad would question her at the dinner table, she always replied, "Don't be jealous. He's no body; he's just a regular customer."

My dad would drop his fork onto his half-eaten dinner plate and leave the table.

One night, my dad, his two large friends, and I waited in the car parked on the side parking lot of mom's video store.

A thin guy wearing spectacles, a blue dress shirt tucked into his faded blue jeans with a blue striped tie dangling in front emerged from my mom's video store.

My dad said, “That’s the guy.” Then dad looked at me, “Wait here, boy. We’re just going to talk to the guy.”

“Why daddy?”

“Sometimes men must chat to each other. Set things straight.”

My dad and his two friends got out of the car and caught the stranger before he could get into his car.

I stood on my knees and peered over the passenger’s seat to get a better view out the back car window.

My dad’s friend punched the stranger in the stomach while the stranger fell to the ground holding his midsection.

My dad kicked him in the face, and his spectacles flew and landed under his car. My dad screamed, “Stay away from her or you’re dead.”

The stranger started sobbing, “Please don’t. I promise. I’ll stay away.” Then dad and his friends returned to the car.

“Dad, can I see mom?”

“How about we go get some ice cream?”

“Okay.”

As dad pulled out of the parking lot, he said, “Just remember, don’t let another man touch your stuff. If you let a man touch your stuff once, then he’ll think he owns it...”

Coming out of my memory, I thought about my dad a little more and couldn’t finish studying. I collected my books and stuck them in my backpack.

The cashier came over, “I’m sorry, but your friend didn’t pay.”

“Why am I not surprised.” I grabbed the receipt and examined it. She even bought a sandwich and banana that I didn’t see when she came to the table. “Wow, it looks like I bought her two lunches.”

I returned the receipt to the cashier, "You can send this receipt to the athletic department to the captain of the hockey team."

The cashier gave me a puzzled look, "I don't understand."

I pulled out my wallet and handed her a twenty. "I'm just kidding. Keep the change."

The guy sitting at the next table looked over again, shaking his head back and forth. "Man, she looks like trouble."

I said, "Perhaps it's better for that other guy to take her. Then he can take over the payments."

We exchanged chuckles.

I grabbed my things and walked to the athletes' dormitory to check out my competition. I roamed the hallways but didn't see anyone. Then I walked around the parking lot behind the dormitory.

I spotted the white Mercedes with shiny chrome rims and pinstripes parked near the back entrance. Of course, it has to be a brand new Mercedes. I saw a good size rock by the tree. I went over and picked it up. I tossed the rock back and forth between my hands. Then I hurled the rock as hardest I could throw.

Crack! The rock hit a tree.

I knew it would be crazy to hurl a rock at a brand new Mercedes, especially in broad daylight with a thousand spectators walking along the sidewalks around the dorm.

I thought, how could I keep Phaedra? Should I be like dad and get two friends to gang up on him and beat him up? Or should I go to the construction store and get some heavy duty chains and padlocks. Then I could kidnap Steve and chain him to a tree in the woods and use him for bear bait. Or should I just kidnap him and sodomize him with a hockey stick. I'll sodomize him so bad, he'll never walk

straight again, let alone ice skate. Nah, I'm not gay. But is it gay to violate him with a hockey stick? Hmmm. Dad's right. An old-fashioned ass kicking would do the trick. I wonder if I can find the phone number to my dad's friends.

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## Chapter 10

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Brothers, you wouldn't believe me if I told you. I wouldn't believe it myself until I witnessed in all its insane glory. Have you had one of those days where everything started out dull but then escalated into complete craziness?

I'm just studying at the library. The current tuition bill is paid. Had several meals off campus, so my stomach was still residing in food heaven. And sometimes my girl meets me at night. What more could I ask for, so here I am with my books spread out in front of me while sitting at a large table on the second floor of the university library.

David walked by. He noticed me. He stopped, turned around, and returned the table. "Hello, Jax."

"Hey, David. So what's new? I haven't seen you for a while."

"Not much." Then he picked up one of my books on lock picking, opened it, and leafed through the pages. "Oh, recreational reading?"

"I'm a college student. When do I get time for recreational reading? But I thought I could earn some extra money and work as an apprentice for the locksmith in town."

He closed the book and placed it on the table again. "It sounds like you stay busy."

"I'm always busy. I've got something always going on."

"I heard you still help out at the homeless center on Saturdays."

"Of course, it's my duty to help the unfortunate. Only fifty dollars separates me from the free room and board on the streets."

David said, "That's great. I mean about helping the unfortunate." He paused and then asked, "Do..." Then he looked down.

I folded my hands on the desk and looked up at him.

He looked at me again. Then he looked around to see if anyone was eavesdropping.

I said, "Well, it appears you have something on your mind. So what's going on?"

"I've been thinking. But I can't tell you here."

"That sounds interesting."

"It is. Could we go somewhere for more privacy?"

"I guess." I closed my notebook, collected my textbooks and slipped them into the backpack. I stacked the lock picking books on top of each other and left them on the table. I'll return in no time. Then I rose, slung the backpack over my shoulder. "Let's go."

We didn't talk until we had walked out through the glass doors of the library. We walked to the side of the library where few students trekked.

We sat down on a bench.

David looked here; then he looked there. Then he looked at me again. "I'm just making sure no one's around."

"Wow. Why all the secrecy?"

David smiled, and then he looked away again. He mumbled, "I take it you don't like the dean."

"I'll freely admit, the Dean and I have had our troubles."

"Are you still upset the admin changed your newspaper article?"

I gasped, "That's an understatement."

David looked me into my eyes and whispered, "What if something happened to the dean?"

I turned away for a minute. Then I turned to stare at David's face again and said, "Come again."

"You know. Maybe something bad could happen to him."

"Are you saying what I think you're saying? Come on, you can't be serious."

"The Dean is the spawn of Satan."

"I agree with you there. He's an evil -"

David punched his opened hand with a fist, "Then we should do something about it?"

"Like what?"

"We'll take care of him here. Then Jesus can meet him at the gate's of heaven."

"Look, I admire your enthusiasm, but what could we possibly do to the dean?"

David picked up his gym bag and opened it. He pulled a towel halfway out of the bag and opened the towel a little to reveal a small handgun tucked inside. Then he folded the towel shut again and slipped it into his gym bag.

"So you're going to walk up to the Dean and pull the trigger."

David shook his head no. He whispered, "We're hoping you would."

"You can't be serious. No way in hell can I do that."

"We've got it all planned out. Sometimes the Dean leaves his office late. You just hide in the bushes on the far side of the parking lot behind the business building. When he comes out..." David used his right hand to form a handgun. He pressed his thumb down, "Bang, bang."

I studied David. On the outside, he appeared to be a well-dressed, polite young man whom a family would let him babysit their kids, but, in the inside, he was maniacal, Christian zealot who's plotting the murder of an innocent person. "I don't mean to be the guy who sneezes on your lunch, but that's murder!"

"It's not murder. It's final judgment."

"Call it as you like, but the state considers that murder. Besides, I never killed anyone before."

"So you're not going to do it?"

"Why don't you do it?"

"I've got a bad history with the dean. We go way -"

“But let me guess. I’m the new chicken in the coop. I’m the one the police wouldn’t suspect.”

“You’ve got it.”

“So I just take that gun, hide in some bushes, and shoot the dean when he leaves the office late one night.”

David nodded his head up and down, “That’s it.”

“Well, that’s pretty straightforward.”

David smiled. “So do you agree?”

“Can you give me some time to think about it?”

“Think about what? Just do it.”

“I came here to study. If I wanted to shoot people, I’ve would have joined the army.”

“Trust me. It’s simple.”

“Have you ever murdered someone before?”

David looked away.

Brothers, I didn’t know what to think. I can’t kill someone, even if I hated him. I could relieve my bladder on the ground of the Dean’s final resting place. However, I wanted to calm the situation, “If I agree, I choose the time and place. Okay?”

“Okay.”

“Then it would be best to wait until Christmas break. That way, few students are around. We can’t afford to have any witnesses around.”

“Agreed.”

I don’t know why I said those words. Although I may have wished some people would die at various points of my life, I didn’t want to be the guy who chose the time and place. But I had to say it. I had to pacify David and give me some time to think about it. I said, “Then give me the gun.”

David placed the gym bag on his lap and unzipped it again. He pulled the towel out and handed it to me.

I slipped the towel into my backpack. “By the way, where did ya get the gun?”

"I prayed one day in church for a gun. And God, the Almighty, provided?"

"Wow. I had no idea. The Lord really does work in mysterious ways. So you went to church one day and prayed, and low and behold, the next minute, you found a gun in the offering tray."

"Yes. That's exactly how I found it."

"Well then, how could I go against God's wishes? I guess the Lord stands on our side and wants to meet the Dean in person. Then let's arrange the meeting."

"Yes siree. God wants to meet him, personally." Then David looked directly into my eyes, "We knew we could count on you."

"Of course you can count me. But remember, I set the date and time. Wait until Christmas break. Okay?"

"Okay. Thank you brother." Then David got up and walked away.

Brothers, you know when you forget something; an invisible finger scratches the back of your mind, urging you to remember.

Eureka! I totally spaced it out. I opened my backpack and searched for my financial calculator.

"Damn." I slung the backpack over my shoulder and jogged to the study table I had occupied thirty minutes ago.

No calculator. I moved the books around. Still no calculator. Just to be complete, I checked the seat on the chairs. No calculator.

Boy brothers, this town's full of thieves. What could I do? Go to the university public safety office and file a theft complaint on a thirty-dollar calculator. So, I returned to the dorm room and lied down for a while. At one point, I thought I hallucinated my conversation with David, so I slipped off the bed and grabbed my backpack. I unzipped it and pulled out the white towel. I unfolded it and sure

enough, a gun was tucked inside. I folded the towel again and slipped the towel into the side pocket of my suitcase.

My phone started chirping. I grabbed it and saw a text message from Phaedra – I'm on my way over.

Ten minutes later, Phaedra knocked on my door.

I let her in, and we laid on the bed together. We started kissing each other as we fondled and touched each other's body.

Then keys fumbled in the lock. Phaedra slid off me and fixed her clothes as Drew walked in. "Hey, guys."

"Hey, Drew," I said.

"So what are you guys up to?"

I winked at Drew several times, "Ah, we're just talking."

"Good." Then Drew removed his sneakers and jumped onto his bed.

I looked at Drew, "Isn't there anything going on tonight?"

"Nope. I thought I would crash early. I'm dead tired. So what were you guys talking about?"

"The mating habits of butterflies."

"Oh, that sounds interesting. Which class do you study that?"

I had to restrain myself from jumping off the bed and thump Drew in the head several times. Instead, I hit my head against the cinder block wall several times.

Phaedra winked at me and smiled.

I lied still for a while as Phaedra lied on my side. Then I turned on my side and looked at Drew, "I heard the Deltas are throwing a killer keg party tonight?"

"I'm all tapped out."

"Tapped out. No way. I'll tell you what, I'll give you twenty bones. You go grab you some fast food and then go check out the party."

Drew glanced at his watch, then at us, "What'll you guys be doing?"

"We'll talk for a while. Then we'll meet you at the party later."

"I guess."

I reached into my jeans and pulled out a wrinkled twenty-dollar bill. I crumpled it into a ball and threw it towards him.

It bounced off his arm and landed on the floor. He jumped off the bed and picked it up. "Thanks, dude." Drew looked over at us, "Do you think you can introduce me to one of your friends, Phaedra?"

I looked at Phaedra and winked.

Phaedra said, "Of course. I have the perfect friend for you. I'll bring her to the party, so you can meet her."

"Great. I'll see you guys there." Drew's smiled as if he were going to a party with plenty of single Playboy bunnies looking for a hot date with a poor college student. Then he left.

"Damn, I thought he'd never leave," as I looked Phaedra into her eyes.

"But won't he be angry. I don't think I can bring someone on short notice."

"Don't worry about Drew. Once he starts drinking, he won't remember anything, anyway."

"I didn't know you hung around with such unsavory characters."

"Well, you wouldn't believe me if I told you. You should meet some of my Christian brothers. I could probably write a new frightening book on abnormal psychology. "

Phaedra and I looked into each other's eyes, and then we started kissing.

I removed her top and began kissing her stomach. Her arms. Then I removed her bra and kissed her breasts. Then I suckled on each breast.

I slowly removed her jeans and kissed up and down her legs. Then I removed my clothes and mounted her.

After we had made love, I laid on my back with Phaedra's head lying on my shoulder.

I started the conversation, "You know a couple weeks ago, your dad gave a speech to the students about the tuition hike, I mean enhancement."

"I know. He told me about it."

"Did he also tell you many students are angry at him?"

"He said something about it. I guess some students are furious, but he said the speech was a success."

"Well, I was there. I thought the crowds would turn ugly."

Phaedra looked up at me, "Really? But students always whine about something."

"That may be true, but I think it's different this time."

"I know students are angry with father, but I also know students are furious about that article you wrote for the school newspaper."

"Oh yeah, that article. How could I forget? Well, don't believe everything you read in the newspaper."

"What was that word you used – happy? Or was it frantic? Excited?"

"You know I'm not happy with that article either. It's definitely not my best piece."

"Then why'd you write it?"

"I wanted to make a statement, a change."

"But you sided with the university."

"Yeah, I did, but somehow I garbled my words."

"But you still wrote the article?"

"Well yes, but I thought I wrote one piece, but I was mistaken and wrote something entirely different."

"It sounds like you're going crazy too."

"You can drop the 'like' because I am crazy."

We lay in bed for a while.

I started the conversation again, "When I was at the meeting, I felt the tension in the air. The students' fury was building like an electrical charge. You know like during a thunderstorm."

"What do you think will happen?"

"I don't know."

"Do you think my dad's in danger?"

"I don't know."

"I know many people in this town are angry at him at one time or another."

"Do you think it's good to have many people angry with him?"

"No, but he says that's the curse of success."

"What do you mean?"

"He talks about taking over the university as president. Then he'll move up to a state capital job - the Secretary of Education."

I closed my eyes shut. Oh god. Secretary of Education. Then what? Governor of the state. I guess if I must make an enemy, I might as well choose the most formidable opponent. One that could really screw your life up.

I said, "Then just do this one thing for me. Just tell your dad to be careful."

I looked down at Phaedra. Her chest rose and fell rhythmical while her eyes were shut.

I whispered, "Phaedra."

Her chest continued to rise and fall.

I looked over at the closet with the closet door slightly ajar. I could see the corner of the suitcase and the bulging side pocket crammed with a gun wrapped in a white towel.

Oh brothers, I just wanted to drop that gun unto a police detectives' desk and tell them the story how David conspired to kill the Dean. Then I could move on. But brothers, would the police believe me? Would they start asking questions? Would they piece it together that I'm the burglar who's terrorizing this tiny town? Oh brothers, there's got to be another way.

I whispered, "Phaedra, do you want to go to the party?"  
She began snoring.

I studied her face as her chest rose and fell. Brothers, I don't know why I felt this strange sensation that I would see Phaedra for the last time. *Hasta Damn onsra this.*

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## Chapter 11

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Brothers, you know, when you look at your ringing cell phone and you get that weird feeling in the back of your head that something bad had happened. I finally got that dreaded phone call.

Walking to the library, I pulled my ringing cell phone out of my front jean's pocket and saw mom calling. I answered, "Hi mom."

"Jax." Then my mother's tears and pouting bombarded my ear.

"Mom! Mom! Are you okay?"

"Jax," followed by more sobbing.

"Mom, is everything okay?"

Mom started crying hard that I could hear her tears dropping on the kitchen linoleum floor from across the state.

"How's dad?"

The tears turned to screeching wails of grief.

"Mom. Is dad okay?"

"He died Jax. Sob. Sob. Sob. He died this morning."

"Mom, how'd it happened?" But I already knew. Dad couldn't beat that cancer that gripped its black fingers around my dad's organs and wouldn't let go.

More tears and wails.

"Mom, I'm coming home, okay? I'll be on the next bus home. Is anyone there with you?"

"Uncle Ron's here."

Uncle Ron grabbed the phone, "I'm sorry Jax."

"Ron, thank you for being there."

"When will you return?" Ron asked.

"I'll come as soon as possible. Just take care of mom, please. Then I'll be there in no time."

"I will."

"Okay."

"Okay."

Then I hung up.

Brothers, no way, could I focus on my homework, so I walked across the town, crossed the suspension bridge to the other side, and walked up the hillside park, where Phaedra and I shared a midnight kiss. On that fantabulous night, we never climbed to the top of the hill, but today, I did climb the steps all the way to the top.

I sat on a bench on top of the hill that overlooked the city.

I looked around in all directions. Brothers, I could've enjoyed the scenic view up here, except I was in no mood to enjoy anything. I just wanted to get away from people and not let them see me in a weak state. I shook an angry fist at the sky. *Knobstick – God*. Then the heavy tears flowed.

I can't believe my dad died. Although I haven't spoken to my father in a year, I really missed him. Of course, once they're gone, we forget all the bad, wicked times and only remember the good ones. I remembered he would take me to the park on a Saturday afternoon after I watched cartoons all morning. We would grab our mitts and would toss a baseball back and forth to each other for an hour or two at the park. Sometimes other kids and their fathers would join us, and if we had enough people, then we would play a friendly baseball game.

I remember other nights, when the burning smells and smoke would ascend from the kitchen while the smoke detector in the hallway buzzed angrily, letting everyone in the house know that an extra-crispy dinner was almost ready. My dad would come to my room and sit on the edge of my bed. He always said, "Shhhh, let's go get a bite to eat."

As we were leaving the side door to the garage, he would call, "Honey, we're going to the store to get some milk," or some other thing my dad thought we needed, but probably wouldn't buy.

We would go around the corner and grab a hamburger and French fries at McDonald's. As we approached the house, he would always say, "Don't tell your mother. Just take a couple bites of your food and wash it down with water. Okay. Let's try to keep her happy."

My cell phone chirped. I looked at my phone. Phaedra left a message.

Hi. How are you?

I wrote, Hi beautiful. I can't talk right now, but I will call you later.

Okay. See you later.

Some part of me wanted to tell Phaedra about my father, and I could invite her into my depressed world, but, unfortunately, I'm a man. Men cannot show weakness. When we have problems, we push everyone out of our world, and perhaps drown our sorrows with alcohol and drugs. Of course, brothers, I don't want people to feel sorry for me or wish me condolences. I would present a poker face to the world and bury my emotions under a thousand ton concrete slab in my mind. Then I would pretend everything was okay. Eventually, everything would be fine once the memories faded and good thoughts crept back into my mind.

Perhaps I should have told Phaedra, but I never did. Who knew, one week away from her would drive a wedge between us.

I returned to the dorm room around nine at night and ran into my roommate as he was locking the dorm room door.

"C'mon Jax. Let's go to a rush for a fraternity."

"Okay, let's go."

We arrived at the fraternity house and a large guy blocked the entrance.

“Drew said, “C’mon. We’re rushing at your fraternity.”

The large guy said, “I don’t recognize you.”

Drew pulled out a blue flyer that advertised the rush.

“So what. You guys look like dweebs.”

I snapped, “Look. We’re rushes. We’re here to rush, so God dammit, let us in.”

The large guy’s mouth dropped while his eyes opened wide. He raised both hands in surrender, “Okay. Okay. Don’t get so pissy over it.” He knew I would throw punches to get that beer, so he moved to the side and opened the door to the house.

Brothers, if I ever needed a beer, tonight was definitely the night to destroy some brain cells.

As we walked in, Drew asked, “What has gotten into you? I thought you were going to hit that dude.”

“I really needed a beer. So we’re here to rush, so let’s rush.”

Walking into the kitchen, we had to shake everyone’s hands and introduce ourselves to every frat boy and frat boy wannabes and frat boy groupies, ad nauseum. Finally, we received our red plastic cups and stood in the keg line.

I felt the gates of heaven open up as I watched the keg guy fill my plastic cup to the rim until foam oozed over the side. I raised that cup to my dry lips. That first succulent taste of malted barley hit my palate. Brothers, I just couldn’t stop drinking and finished my cup in one gulp.

The keg guy said, “Alright man. Slow down and leave some beer for everyone else.” Then he pointed at me and screamed to the other guys, “I think we got us here a top recruit.”

The keg guy filled my beer to the rim again and I raised my cup for a toast.

Everyone cheered.

I inhaled that second beer.

Drew said, "Don't get plastered. I'm not carrying you home."

After my third refill, Drew and I headed to the billiard room to watch people play pool.

Drew asked, "Wow. I never saw you drink so much. What's gotten into you?"

"I've been under a little stress."

"I hear ya, man. Let's toast."

So we raised our cups in a salute, tapped them together, and drank our beers.

I haven't eaten since my mom called this morning. The world started shaking and tilting under my feet, so I grabbed the door frame to steady myself. I looked at Drew, "I was thinking about going home this weekend."

"Do you think you're going for good?"

"Oh no. I just need to see my mom. Then I'll return a couple of days later." I took another sip from my beer, "I just wanted to ask you for a favor."

"Shoot."

"I needed to borrow a little bit for a bus ticket."

Drew looked away. Then he said, "I wish I could help you, man, but I'm tapped out myself."

I took another swig of my beer, "No problem. I'll find a way."

I studied Drew when he looked away because I knew he was a lying bastard. I saw the Western Union receipt in the wastebasket yesterday in the dorm room. I knew momma had sent a little spending money for her boy.

Drew looked at me and then turned to look across the doorway to the living room, "Hey, isn't that your girl?"

I turned and looked in his direction. Sure enough. Phaedra was standing in the middle of the room, drinking a beer, and standing with a group of guys.

Drew asked, “Did you invite her to the party?”

“Perhaps I said something to her about the party, but I don’t remember.” But I didn’t know about the party tonight until I caught Drew leaving the dorm room. I knew Phaedra was a little naughty, but I didn’t know the extent of her naughtiness.

When she turned to look in my direction, I raised my cup in a toast and drank it.

She waved goodbye to the guys she was conversing with and walked over.

When she stood next to me, I wrapped my left arm around her and reeled her in.

I said, “How are you?”

Phaedra replied, “Good. I’m surprised to see you here.”

“Well, you know. I needed a little break from my studies.”

“I don’t like the smell of alcohol. Would you like to go for a walk?”

Her body’s warmth was inviting. “Okay. Let’s go.” I drank my beer and sat the empty cup on one of the bookshelves that was attached to the wall.

I turned to look at Drew and said goodbye.

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Brothers, no way in hell, did I want to do another break in? But I needed the money to return home. I also became a junky to the adrenaline rush.

The next night, I slipped my old jacket on and emptied the contents of my backpack onto my desk. Then I snuck out of the dorm room while Drew was singing in the shower. I

hopped down the side stairwell at the end of the building that students rarely used.

Brothers, I knew my alibi sucked, but I would play it as if I was still in the dormitory. Drew probably would think I went to watch tv in the community room or watch a movie in another dorm room.

I walked to the edge of town to the junk yard and climbed up and over the fence.

Old flattened cars were stacked everywhere. I searched for an old car where I could open the trunk.

I walked and saw one car with the hood open, engine missing, and the driver's door propped open. I walked to it and pulled the lever to open the trunk.

I saw blackness, so I felt around in the trunk. Nope, just a bunch of junk and spare parts.

I went to the next car and did the same. Then the next. And the next. Finally, I found it, an old jack and crowbar. I deposited the jack parts and crowbar into my backpack.

I walked to the grocery store in the town's center.

I walked along the street in front of the store and looked at the front windows from a distance. I glanced at my watch - ten o'clock. I knew the store closed early on Wednesday night, and nobody should be around.

I walked behind the building to the loading dock. I knew the sliding cargo door opened several inches, just enough to slip a jack under it.

I slipped on my gloves and used them to wipe the jack and crow bar clean. Then I assembled the jack and slipped it under the sliding door. I pumped the jack, applying immense upward pressure on the door. The cargo door started to creak and moan.

One more pump - more moaning and creaking.

Another pump - snapped and something metallic crashed to the floor.

I ran and hid behind the dumpster, crouching low and searching the area for witnesses. After fifteen minutes, no sign of life. I ran to the loading dock and pumped the jack several more times, and, brothers, I finally had enough space to slide under the door.

I tiptoed through the storage room to the swinging metal door that led to the store. I swung the door open a little while blinding fluorescent light poured into the storage room.

I covered my eyes with my free hand. Once my eyes adjusted, I slipped on a face mask and jogged to the manager's office. Brothers, I would be sinking in a deep shit pit if anyone was standing in the parking lot and was looking in. They would easily spot me for those vulnerable seconds as I ran to the manager's office.

I made it to the office and hid behind the corner. I looked at the front store windows – no sign of life.

"Awesome," I mumbled. Then I pried the crowbar between the wooden door and frame and pushed hard. The wooden door and frame screamed under the crowbar's force. Then the frame around the doorknob snapped and broke into pieces while the manager's office door swung open.

I went behind the manager's desk and crouched there. I knew the safe was in the cabinet behind the desk that even a blind thief could spot a mile away. But, of course, brothers, I had a little inside info. I saw the safe when I entered the manager's office five weeks ago to apply for a job. As I entered his office, he closed the safe and swiveled in his chair to greet me.

That day, I took an application and thanked him but never returned to the store, or at least until now.

I used the crowbar to pry the safe from the cabinet. Then I placed the safe on top the manager's desk.

The safe was a cheap electronic one that anyone could buy at a discount store. Of course, travelers could find this safe in any hotel room. Although heavy metal protects these safes, these budget safes all possess the same flaw.

I lifted the safe a little from the front and bounce it on top of the desk while simultaneously turning the safe's locking knob at the same time.

I bounced it again and tried to open the door. Then again, and again. Finally, on the tenth or twentieth bounce, the bounce jiggled and opened the locking mechanism for a brief moment while I turned the locking knob at the same time. The safe's door popped opened, and I removed all the money and checks and spread them on the table.

I removed the money and slipped it into my pocket. I had plenty of time to count it once I got outta of town. Then I stacked the checks and folded them and slipped them into my other pocket.

I removed the picture frame from the wall that held the commemorative two-dollar bill. I smashed the picture frame on the floor and broke the glass. Then I grabbed the two-dollar bill and slipped it with the checks.

I opened all the desk drawers and spilled the contents onto the ground. I looked at my mess making sure this break-n-take seemed truly random.

I jogged to the manager's door and peered out. No traffic. No people, but I heard a dog howled in the distance. I sprinted to the storage room and ran to the cargo door. Approaching the cargo door, I dropped to my side and slid under the loading dock door in one swoop. I quickly lowered the jack and dissembled it. I slipped the jack and crowbar into my backpack and got the hell out of there.

I walked to the center of the blue suspension bridge. I waited until the light traffic became dead and the dropped the jack and crowbar one by one into the river.

I caught the bus the next morning and headed home.

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As I burst through the front door to my parent's house, my mom sprang off the couch and ran to me. She wrapped her arms around me and hugged me tightly while she whispered, "You came home." Then the tears flowed from her eyes again.

After my mom let me go, Uncle Ron came over and shook my hand. "I'm glad to see you."

"I said I would come home, so here I am."

After we had said our hellos, we didn't talk much. Even during dinner, my mom left the tv blaring, which was fine with me. A noisy house was much better than a quiet house where sad thoughts would sprout from the quietness.

I know my mom was going through hard times. She would switch off the tv at dinner time, so the family could share a moment together as we ate the most important meal of the day or at least until my dad got sick. Then my mom and I shared many quiet dinners together.

The home felt empty, eerie, surreal. I excused myself and headed to my room but stopped at the spare bedroom's door.

I turned the knob and walked into the spare bedroom where my stricken father hid away from the world. I'm not even sure the last time I had entered this room. It had to be years. I was surprised to see the room's shape - the bed was made, no discarded objects tossed on the floor, and no dirty clothes hanging on the backs of chairs or piled in a corner. The room was spotless while the smell of potpourri filled the room like a field of flowers. As I walked around in this room, only the trashcan indicated signs of my dad's

existence. I saw the wastebasket filled with Snicker bar wrappers. I sat down on the edge of his bed.

I noticed the old baseball and mitts lying on the bed stand. I couldn't believe my dad kept them after all these years. I picked up my mitt and slipped it on. Wow, a little snug. Then I tossed the baseball up in the air and caught it a couple of times.

I slipped the mitt off and placed it next to me. Then I saw the photo albums lying on the bed. Dad must have leafed through them when he knew death hid under the bed, waiting for him to fall asleep.

I picked the top photo album and browsed through it. I studied every picture on every page as the tears flowed down my cheeks.

I saw my mom and dad's high school graduation pictures. Then pictures of my mom and dad dating. They looked so young, vibrant when they had the whole world in front of them.

They had several pictures where they were sitting on a park bench near a duck pond, where my dad proposed to my mom. Then wedding pictures filled several pages.

I picked up the second album. The whole album was the first seven years of my life - my birthdays, Christmases, and Thanksgivings.

I picked up the third album and only half was filled with pictures. The older I got, the fewer pictures the family put into the album. Of course, that's when the cancer arrived and the family stopped enjoying life.

I saw the last picture, where I stood hugging my mother as I wore the high school ceremony graduation robes. I remembered that day - only mom came. That's when my dad started locking himself up in his room to hide from the world.

I saw my dad scribbled a note below the graduation picture – *I'm sorry Jax. I wanted to say goodbye to you, but I didn't want you to see what the cancer did to me. Whatever you do in life, I'll always be proud of you. I love you. Dad.*

I grabbed the photo albums and stacked the mitts on top with the baseball wedged into one of the mitts.

Walking to the door, I saw a Snicker's bar lying on top of the dresser. I grabbed it and placed it on the mitt with the baseball and headed to my room.

I locked my door and pulled the money and checks out from my backpack and counted it – three thousand, five-hundred and fifty-three dollars in cash and about twelve hundred in checks.

I mumbled, "Well dad, would you still be proud of me if you knew how I was financing college?"

Something kept scratching the back of my mind. Something was not right. Eureka! I didn't have my black skeleton key. I turned my pockets inside out. Nothing! I grabbed my backpack and opened every pocket and dumped everything out. Nothing! I turned the backpack upside down and shook it. *Kumbang, dammit!* Several pens and coins fell out but no key. *Shit!*

I sat down and tried to think – when was the last time I saw it. I closed my eyes and tried to remember. Then I heard my mom call from the bottom of the stairs, "Jax, you wanna watch tv."

I yelled, "Okay mom. I'll be right down."

I grabbed my backpack and slipped the checks into the bottom pocket and the money into the top pocket. Then I went downstairs to watch the news with mom and my uncle as we sat in silence.

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We all piled into my mom's car while Uncle Ron drove us to the requiem on Saturday. We didn't speak; nor listen to the radio as we drove to the funeral parlor. I watched the scenery pass by as if I were stuck in a nightmare and couldn't awaken. When we walked into the funeral parlor, I sat quietly in the back row and watched strangers walk in and fill the room. Most of them said the same thing - they shook my hand and offered their condolences to my father. I'm your dad's friend from high school. We used to be very close. Your dad said so many good things about you. I bet you're dad would be proud of you, and so on, and so on.

I could only muster a thank you, but I don't recall a single one of them ever coming to house to pay a visit when my dad was sick. I hoped these people didn't come to the funeral because they thought my dad had left them a little something from his estate. If they only knew. The medical bills wiped out our assets. We had no estate, only the woes of bankruptcy.

I forced myself to stand and walk to the coffin in front of the room. The closer I approached the casket, the more tears flowed from my eyes and ran down my cheeks. Once I made it to the coffin, I peered down at my father. Although he looked at peace, the cancer ate away his body leaving him dried out like a desiccated prune wearing a suit.

Although we haven't been to church in years, the minister was nice enough to come and read a eulogy.

I'm not sure how and when I came home, but I just lay on my bed. Then my uncle came into my room, and sat down on the corner of the bed, just like my dad used to do.

"I don't think I have to tell you, but your mom needs you?"

"I know."

"So, what are your plans?"

"I think it's best to return to college."

“Have you thought about staying? Perhaps find a job.”

I looked away and stared at the wall.

“There are plenty of good jobs here.”

I turned to look at my uncle, “Where?”

“Ah, well. Yeah, I think the lumber store is hiring.”

“Yeah great. I stayed in this town two years after graduation – nothing. This town has nothing for me.”

“It has your mother.”

I looked away.

“Someone needs to take care of your mom.”

I looked at my uncle, “Will you stay with my mom?”

“Yes, of course. But it’s more than that.”

“What do you mean?”

“You’re the man of the house.”

I looked away again and mumbled, “I see.”

“Just think it over.” Then he rose and left the room. He slowly closed the door as not to make a sound.

Don’t get me wrong. I don’t mind staying and get that job at the lumber store, but I don’t fill right staying in this house. Although I lived here all my life, I feel I no longer belong here anymore. I feel like I’m staying at a stranger’s house.

I picked up my phone to check my messages. Nada. Phaedra didn’t bother to call or text. Well, it’s looks like no loves me up there at the university.

The next morning, I rose, showered, dressed, and packed my suitcases before my uncle and mom woke up.

I tiptoed downstairs and avoided the spots where the floor creaked, but as soon as I stepped on one, I stayed there a minute to let the board settle before continuing.

I left a note on the kitchen table – Mom, sorry. But I must return to college. I also have some money left over from my financial aid. I’ll send you more if you need it. Love you. Jax. I pulled out two thousand dollars and placed it on the table

next to the note. I grabbed an empty coffee mug from the cupboard and placed it on top of the money.

I walked out the front door. Reaching the street, I turned around and looked at the house. I no longer belong here anymore. Then I headed to the bus station.

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## Chapter 12

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Brothers, I returned to the depressing college town by nightfall feeling as if someone took a pin and popped my balloon world. I called Phaedra several times, but the girl never returned my phone calls.

I know she loves unique knickknacks, so I swallowed my pride and rode a broken down city bus to get to the mall on the other side town, if you can call it a mall – a small collection of stores connected together by a covered walkway with the food court thrown in the center.

I wandered into the mall and spotted a small jewelry store with two rolls of glass cases. I walked up and down the aisles and glanced at the glittering gems.

The saleswoman asked, “Do you need any help, sir?”

“Yes, mam. Where do you keep the engagement rings?”

The saleswoman walked to one section of the glass case while I met her there on the other side.

I hunched over to examine the different rings – some were white while others were gold.

I whistled, “Wow. Why are the white rings much more expensive than the gold ones?”

“That’s white gold.”

“Sounds cool.” Then I scratched my chin and thought about it and asked, “But I thought gold was an element. How could an element be two different colors?”

“I’m not sure, but I’ll ask the manager when he comes in.”

I scanned the price tags ranging from \$299 to \$3,000.

I looked up at the saleswoman, “Thank you, but I’m not sure my relationship is quite there for an engagement ring.”

I turned to leave.

“You can always buy your special someone a promise ring.”

I stopped and looked at her again, "A promise ring? What's that?"

"A promise to commit to her."

"You mean like a pre-engagement ring before the engagement ring?"

"Yes, something like that. It's the new fad."

I shook my head no, "I'm a traditional guy. I'll be back to buy that ring when the sun rises in the west and sets in the east. Thank you." I walked out of the store, shaking my head back and forth.

I walked around the mall and stopped at the antique relic store. Phaedra kept talking about all the cool stuff the store sells.

I walked along the first row and looked at the antique wooden desks, dressers, and armchairs. I didn't think a piece of furniture would spruce up her life, so I walked along the second row. Plenty of vintage stuff - old tea, coffee, and cracker tin containers, stained coffee mugs and teacups, scratched silver trays, and so on and so on. I shook my head. I knew Phaedra drank plenty of tea and coffee, but I never saw her make any. She always drank the expensive stuff at the coffee shops.

Finally, I wandered to the third row and, brothers, right at the end, I spotted old record albums wrapped in thick plastic grouped in large racks. I sprinted over to the racks and started browsing. I saw AC/DC, Aerosmith, Boston...as I flipped through the first stack. Some albums were in mint condition while other album covers looked faded and worn. I scooted over to the next stack and browsed through the vintage music and spotted names I didn't recognize. I went through another stack - Pink Floyd, Styx, and Yes. I was about to leave when I spotted the small 45s - you know the little records with one song on each side - the kind my mom and dad grew up on. Of course, don't forget to change the

speed on the record player – otherwise the music comes out slowly as if the words sing slower. Then I saw the name – Beatles printed on the sleeve with a picture with the song ‘Can’t buy me love.’

I picked it up.

The cashier, a middle-aged Asian guy, looked over and said, “Be careful. That one expensive.” Then he pointed at a sign – *‘Nice to see, nice to hold. Once broken, considered sold.’*

I looked at the price tag and whistled. Then I looked at the cashier, “Does this thing actually cost a thousand dollars?”

“Yes. Uh original. And extremely rare.”

I walked to the cashier’s counter. “I’m a student. Do you offer any student discounts?”

The cashier laughed. “Sorry. No student discount. You pay full price.”

“C’mon. This really can’t be worth a thousand bucks.”

“Yes. It really worth that much.”

“What if I give you nine hundred for it?”

The cashier shook his head no. “Come. Follow me.”

I followed the owner to his small office at the back of the store.

We walked in. He picked up a wooden picture frame with a glass front from a shelf, “Free picture frame.”

“That’s it. I only get a free picture frame?”

“You don’t listen to record. Record a collector item.”

I thought about it and looked around his office until I spotted the college degrees hanging on the wall. I have to ask, “You really have a master’s degree in chemical engineering?”

The cashier nodded yes.

“And you work here?”

Cashier nodded yes again and added, “Proprietor.”

Brothers, what could I say? I'm going to college so I wouldn't have to work in a store or fast food restaurant. Then I felt sorry for the unfortunate guy, "Okay, I'll take it."

I handed the record to the cashier.

He placed the record on the desk and disassembled the picture frame. Like a surgeon returning an organ to the patient, the cashier centered the album on the glass. Then he covered the back with a black felt cloth and secured the back picture frame to it.

I gasped when he flipped the frame over. It looked beautiful, although no one would ever hear the Beatles sing this song.

We returned to the front counter, and I pulled out a stack of bills and counted out one thousand dollars.

The cashier said, "Thank you. Please return again." Then he wrapped bubble film around the picture frame and stuck it into a plastic bag.

My stomach started growling, so I went for a hamburger and fries at the food court. Brothers, there I am, sitting there and savoring every juicy bite of a foot high burger with a juicy patty covered with cheese and topped with thick layers of tomatoes, thick pickles, lettuce, and sliced red onions. Then I spotted the Dean sitting across from me eating a hamburger too.

He looked up and noticed me.

I looked down again and bit into my burger and pretended I didn't see him.

Finishing his meal, the Dean grabbed a napkin, wiped the greasy stains off his lips, crumpled the napkin and tossed it onto his tray. Then he left his tray and leftover food containers on the table and walked away.

How rude, I thought. *Bastinado, such he is.* I guess he's used to people cleaning up after him.

I lowered my head and hoped he didn't spot me. I even placed my right elbow on the table and covered the right side of my face with my hand as I munched on my burger with my other hand.

I looked at my tray, grabbed a French fry and drenched it in ketchup, and plopped it into my mouth.

"Jax, I presumed."

I dropped my hands under the table and looked up feigning surprise while I quickly chewed that French fry.

The Dean smiled.

Swallowing my food, I answered, "You presumed correctly."

"I hope you accept my apologies, young man. How do you say it? I think we got off on the wrong proverbial foot the other night at the honor's banquet."

I raised my eyebrows and widened my eyes while my jaw almost hit the ground. "Really?" I asked.

"Let bygones be bygones."

"Okay. This is certainly good news. I agree. Let bygones be bygones."

"Shall we dispense with the pleasantries and jump right to business?"

I nodded my head in agreement.

"I am throwing a humble social gathering on Saturday for the elite business students and professors. It shall be my pleasure if you can honor us with your presence."

"That sounds great. Let me check my schedule, but I think I'm free on Saturday night."

"Outstanding. Do you know the address of my residence?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then I should expect you around eight."

"I'll be there."

The Dean walked away, and I returned to my burger and fries. Perhaps, the Dean had changed his mind about me. I knew I would win him over, eventually.

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I met Phaedra at the small mall the next day, the same one brothers, where I splurged on my girl with an expensive gift. Brothers, of course, I didn't want Phaedra to see me riding the city bus, so I came an hour early and waited in the food court sipping mint tea.

After an hour, I entered Johnny Rockets - the old-fashioned burger place and grabbed a booth. As I walked through the doors, I entered simpler times in the 1950s, when gasoline costs twenty-three cents per gallon, a stamp was three cents, and an ounce of gold was thirty-five bucks. But, of course, customers pay contemporary prices to eat those nostalgic burgers and fries from a bygone era. Of course, brothers, I would be lucky to leave this place with fifty bucks still in my wallet.

Phaedra arrived fifteen minutes later and scooted in the booth across from me.

I asked, "How are you?"

She looked down while she played with her spoon and fork. "I'm okay."

I reached over to hold her hands, "It's been a while."

"I know," Phaedra said while looking around at the 50s memorabilia on the wall. "Do you remember the Nehi grape soda?"

"How I could I forget. Not my favorite. I remember my mom always bought RC Cola because it was cheaper than Pepsi."

The waitress came to our table and wrote down our orders on her notepad. Then she left.

I let Phaedra's hands go, and she started playing with the old-fashioned miniature jukebox at the table's end. "You've got any quarters."

I pulled out some coins and stacked them on the table. She grabbed the quarters and fed the jukebox.

Then Dion started singing *Wander around Sue*.

"Speaking of music. I got you something special."

Phaedra turned and stared at me. Then she smiled, "Really?"

"Of course. I think you'll love it."

I pulled out the picture frame with the Beatle's album from the plastic bag. Then I placed the picture frame right side up on the middle of the table.

Her smile deepened as her hands traced the picture frame, "Wow! What's this?"

"What's it look like?"

"An old record. But I don't have a record player."

"That's okay. You're not supposed to play this record anyway."

"Why not?"

"Well look at it."

"I see it's the Beatles, my favorite group."

"Yup. And it's extremely rare."

"How rare?"

"It's rare enough that'll you never want to take it out of its packaging. It's a 1964 Capitol 45 Can't buy me love."

"So it's expensive?"

"Yup."

"How much?"

"It's a gift."

Our food came, and I returned the picture frame to the plastic bag and placed it on the booth seat next to me.

I picked up my hamburger and took a bite while Phaedra poured honey-Dijon dressing onto her Caesar salad.

When I looked at her, she glowed. She loved her gift.

Finishing eating, we walked around the mall holding hands while she clutched the bag with the framed album in her other hand. She occasionally peered in my direction and blushed while her smile deepened.

As we walked by an upscale boutique, she tugged at my hand and led me inside the store.

I sat in a chair and watched Phaedra move from clothes rack to clothes rack. She would pull out a hanger with jeans and study it for a minute. Then she would return it and pull out something else.

A young sales girl who was very pleasing to the eyes walked over, "Can I help you."

Phaedra turned to face the girl. "Can I try this on?"

The girl pointed towards the back of the store, "The dressing room is over there."

"Great." Then Phaedra grabbed a mound of clothes and headed to the dressing room.

I looked around. Then I fumbled with my cell phone and checked my messages. Perhaps I'll play a smart phone game or two.

Phaedra reappeared with the mound of clothes, and she dumped them on to the sales counter, "Thank you, but none of them fit."

She walked over, grabbed my hand, and we left the store. She turned to look at me, "I have class in an hour."

"Great. Can you give me a ride to campus?"

"Didn't you drive?"

"Nope. The car's in the shop for repairs."

"It seems like your car has been in the shop for quite a while now."

"I know. It's hard to find an honest mechanic in this town."

As we walked out the mall and headed across the parking lot holding hands, I noticed a price tag sticking out from the bottom of her shirt.

I tugged at the price tag, "What's this?"

She stopped and peered down, "I've must of forgotten to take it off."

I read the ninety-nine dollar price tag, "Really?"

"Yes."

"It's from Glamour Boutique. Weren't we just there?"

"Hmmm."

I tugged at Phaedra's hand until we both stopped. I turned to look her straight into her eyes, "Did you shoplift this?"

Phaedra blushed and looked away.

"Phaedra, I didn't see you pay for this."

She let go of my hand and continued walking to her dark green Honda Accord. Phaedra placed the framed Beatles album into the trunk and got into the driver's side.

I ran to the car and jumped in on the passenger side before she could drive off.

I continued, "You can't steal things that don't belong to you."

"You sound like my father."

"Perhaps your father's right, or at least in this case."

"It's no big deal."

"Oh, no big deal. I thought you said you wanted to be a lawyer? It takes only one criminal conviction, and the state will bar you from taking the bar exam. The state will not allow you to help seniors fill out voter registration cards."

Phaedra looked over and shrugged her shoulders. She started the car and headed towards campus.

I opened the glove box and pulled out the album filled with music CDs. I spot a dozen hockey ticket stubs. I looked at her, "I didn't know you were into hockey."

Phaedra continued driving.

"Did we win any games? I think we won one game, but I haven't kept up."

Phaedra frowned and looked over, "We won two games."

"Oh, I stand corrected. That should help our team get into the playoffs. That's good. At least you are supporting the team." I browsed through the stubs and noticed - complimentary - stamped in red across them. "Oh, that's right. You know the water boy."

"Captain."

"Oh, I keep confusing the two." I picked a Beatles CD - Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band and slid it into the CD player.

I turned the volume up, so we could avoid conversation. Of course, I didn't want to make her too angry. It would be a long walk to campus.

She parked the car near the business building.

I looked at her, "Look, perhaps I been too drastic. I just don't like you shoplifting."

Phaedra kept staring ahead as if she didn't hear me.

"I want to make this right, okay. I'll take care of this."

I reached over and yanked the price tag off.

Using my other hand, I turned Phaedra's face towards me, and I leaned over to kiss her lips.

Phaedra turned her head again, and I kissed the hair on the back of her head.

I mumbled, "Thanks for the ride," and climbed out of the car.

Brothers, what am I going to do with this woman? The next day, I returned to the mall and slipped the price tag and a hundred dollars into an envelope and dropped it into the mailbox of Glamour Boutique when no one was looking.

I didn't care about leaving fingerprints on the money or envelope. How many shoplifters care enough to make things right? I may be a scumbag thief, but my girl doesn't have to be. She can become the best attorney in the state.

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## Chapter 13

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Brothers, I hadn't spoken to Phaedra in days but her dad, the awesome dean, had invited me to join the family. See, I knew I would win the Dean over. When I looked at myself in the bathroom mirror, I hate to say it, and I despise arrogant people, but I looked snazzy, ready to rub elbows with the university elite. I showered and shaved and wore a short-sleeve button shirt and left the shirrtails untucked and draped over my Levi blue jeans.

As I slapped on some hot cologne while staring at the mirror, I studied the face staring back me. Then I nodded a badass greeting to myself.

I walked the forty-five minutes to the Dean's house. How could I miss the party? Walking up the familiar staircase to the hillside park and approaching Phaedra's house, I never seen so many cars parked in a small neighborhood, the guests parked cars on both sides and around the cul-de-sac at the end of the street.

I sauntered up the steps and rang the doorbell.

Dean Tremaine opened the door. At first, he looked surprised, and then he said, "Hello Jax. I had hoped you would have no troubles finding the house."

"Thank you, sir."

The Dean moved to the side and made a sweeping motion with his arm, "Please, come in."

I walked into the luxurious living room, where numerous students and professors stood in hodgepodge groups debating and challenging each other, trying to show off their mental acumen.

The Dean closed the door and led me to the kitchen, "Please help yourself to some refreshments."

"Thank you." I looked around the kitchen and finally approached a large, center island tabletop covered with trays and plates of every delicious food imaginable.

Brothers, so much saliva dripped from my mouth, I could put out a house fire. Spread out in front of my eyes was a smorgasbord of delectable grub with plates of crab and lobster stuff mushrooms, pot stickers, asparagus wrapped with crispy prosciutto, Indonesian satay, dates stuffed with cheese and wrapped with crunchy bacon, and stuff I didn't even recognize. I honestly didn't know where to start, so I grabbed a plastic plate and grabbed a portion of everything.

The Dean patted me on the back, "Enjoy yourself." Then he returned to the living room.

An older student wearing a bow tie and wire-rimmed glasses and sprouting a thin, spotty beard, walked into the kitchen, "Hello. I see you found the food."

"Yeah, the foods great," I said between bites as I shoved the esculent morsels into my mouth, "Sure beats the dog food the university serves in the cafeterias."

"When the Dean throws a party, he doesn't waste any expense."

"Amen, brother."

The student approached and extended his hand for a handshake, "I apologize, but I haven't seen you around before. You must be a new honor student."

I shook his hand, "Of course I am. I just started my first semester."

"My name's Mark."

"Hello, just call me Jax."

"You must be a really good student for the Dean to take such an immense liking to you, so quickly."

"Of course, I am. I'm one of the best students in the School of Business."

"You gotta be. It takes a long time for the Dean to like and accept anyone new."

"Well, one of the tricks I learned is a person must know how to talk to people. I used my words and charm to have the Dean purring like a pussy cat in my hands."

"Wow, you must've said some magical words. The Dean has spoken to me a couple of times, and I'll graduate with top honors next semester."

"Well, you've just gotta penetrate his pompous exterior." I leaned closer and whispered, "And you never know. He may even become my father in law."

Mark's eyes widened, as he shook his head, "No way."

I grabbed a cup of ice tea and sipped it. Then I grabbed a dessert spoon and a wine glass filled with zabaglione mixed with raspberries and sliced strawberries. I shoveled one spoonful after another and let the exquisite dessert danced wildly on my taste buds.

"That dessert must be really good, the way you scarfed it down."

After licking my spoon clean, "The custard's so creamy, so silky, I'll probably have another two or three."

I placed the empty wine glass onto the table and added, "Besides, life can lead to some interesting things." I picked up a slice of Swiss cheese and started nibbling on it.

"That may be true in some cases, but I don't think so in this case."

I almost choked on the cheese, "Why not?"

"I think Phaedra has her eye on someone else."

"No way. I know she likes me. She's my girl."

"I don't think so. I am sure she likes someone else. I saw her go out the back door with the hockey captain about ten minutes ago. They were holding hands."

"Come again?"

"Yeah. I think I saw them together earlier."

"Oh come on. They're just friends."

“Really. When do friends hold hands and gaze into each other’s eyes with a dreamy look?”

I felt molten lava pulsate through the veins of my face, “Look, friend, you need to watch what you say.”

“Okay. Don’t get bent out of shape. Just go see for yourself.”

“Okay, I shall humor you and check it out myself. Where’d you see them last?”

“I think they were headed to the swimming pool in the back yard.”

“I’ll prove to you that they’re just friends.”

“Sure, they’re great friends. I think I even saw a little smeared lipstick on the hockey captain’s cheek.”

I turned a dark crimson as the lava heated my face another thousand degrees.

Mark swallowed his food hard and almost choked, “Sorry. Perhaps that was the wrong couple.”

“You said you saw them near the swimming pool.” I pointed at the back door, “Right out there?”

Marked nodded his head up and down.

“Then I’ll go talk to her.”

I placed my plate on the edge of the counter and went out the backdoor.

Numerous lanterns illuminated the backyard while steam mists rose from the heated swimming pool.

I spotted a shadow of the couple sitting at a dark spot near the patio table as they exchanged a passionate kiss.

I refused to believe that Phaedora was over there in the arms of another man, so I stomped to the patio table.

As I approached, my heart stopped for a second as I recognized Phaedora’s familiar shape.

Brothers, what could I say? I clenched my hands into fists and stopped five feet away, “Hey Phaedora, I leave you

alone for two minutes, and you're already kissing another dude."

The two lovers jerked away from each other. Then Phaedra screamed, "Jax! What're you doing here?"

"You're father invited to the party."

Steve said, "Who's the dweeb?"

I yelled, "Steve, shut up."

Steve jumped out of the chair and clenched his fists. Then Phaedra sprang from her chair and stood between us.

"Steve, you need to sit your ass back down and think about how to win some hockey games. Stay away from other men's girlfriends."

Steve screamed, "She's not your girl." He stepped closer while Phaedra tried to push him back. Steve added, "Phaedra, this guy needs to leave, so I'll help you take out the trash."

"Well come on then. Just don't hide behind a girl. You pussy!"

Steve circled around Phaedra fast and ran at me.

I stepped to the side while extending my left foot out.

Brothers, you should have seen it. Steve tripped, went airborne, and splashed head first into the pool.

I turned to look at Steve and said, "See, that's why we don't win any games. You have no hand-eye coordination."

Phaedra screamed, "Steve. Steve."

I turned and walked to the house and entered the kitchen.

Mark stood near the counter where I had left him. He turned when I entered the kitchen. He quickly looked down at the counter again.

"Thanks for the information. I did find her."

He looked at me, "I hope everything is okay."

“Yup, everything’s fine. Like I told you, she’s just friends with the hockey captain. Nothing more, nothing less. Besides, I heard the hockey captain is gay.”

Mark laughed, “That’s not the word around campus.”

I grabbed a new plastic plate and added a mound of food to it, “What’s the word around campus?”

“He has a long line of women waiting to jump into his Mercedes.”

“That may be true, but that’s just for show. He doesn’t want the people to know his true sexual orientation.”

“Whatever.”

“Well, at least I solved one mystery tonight. I understand why we don’t win any hockey games.”

Mark squinted his eyes, “Uh. I don’t understand.”

“That’s inside information.” I carried my plate of food to the living room.

Dean Tremaine looked in my direction, and then he approached me. “Have you spoken with my daughter?”

I stopped and just glared at the dean.

“As I have already told you, young man, you have a dim future ahead of you. Steve can provide a better life for my little girl.”

I looked into the Dean’s eyes, “Thank you for the wonderful evening.” I stomped to the front door while the Dean burst into laughter.

Everyone in the room became quiet.

I opened the door and walked out. Of course, brothers, I gently closed the door behind me. What could I do? He’s the Dean of the business school. If I had punched him in the face or screamed obscenities at him in front of the students and faculty, he could have me thrown out of the university. I want to deny him that pleasure of signing my expulsion form. Then I smiled. That’s right. Perhaps I should kill the prick.

I wandered to the hillside park, and I sat on a bench and ate that plate of food. Come on brothers. I know pride dictates that I should throw the food away, but it may be a while before I sample food of this caliber again.

After I had finished eating, I looked at the city sprawled out in front of me during twilight.

Phaedra ran to me, panting, "Jax. Jax." Then she sat next to me. I'm sorry Jax. I should've told you earlier."

I just sat there.

Phaedra looked at me while I looked away. "Jax, I didn't want to hurt you."

I looked at her, "Well, you did an excellent job of ripping my heart out of my chest, stomping on it several times, and tossing it back in."

"Jax, I wanted to tell you that day at the mall, but you had to give me that expensive gift."

"You didn't have to accept the gift. Or the free skirt from the store."

Phaedra sat there quietly.

I continued, "You must like riding around in his nice Mercedes."

"Jax, it was never about the car."

"Then you must like watching him play hockey?"

"Phew. I hate sports."

"Then what does he have that I can't give you."

Phaedra swallowed and looked away.

"See, you can't even te--"

"You're boring Jax."

"What?"

She looked at me again, "You don't do anything exciting."

"Are you serious?"

"Well, Steve's exciting."

“I see. I didn’t realize Steve was so terri-bad. What makes that so exciting?”

Phaedra looked away.

I continued, “That’s the way it goes. Don’t worry about me.”

“Like one night, we waited in his car. And.”

“Please tell.”

“He ran inside the convenience store and stole two bottles of vodka.”

“Gee, I guess that’s exciting. And I just thought he was the dumb jock type.”

“He’s not dumb.”

“You’re right. I guess that’s a little crazy. If he got caught, the university would kick him off the team. Maybe expel him from the university.”

“Jax, you’re a nice guy. It’s just, you’re too nice. And it drives me crazy.”

“Too nice. That sounds ominous, but I didn’t know I needed a criminal record to date you.”

“I’m not asking you to be a criminal. Just be a little more crazy, a little more fun. Then many girls will fall for you.”

“Thank you for the advice.”

“Jax, I must go.”

“Give my regards to your dad and Steve. Tell Steve I’m sorry about the incident.”

Phaedra looked at me again, “Don’t be angry with me.”

“I’m not.”

Phaedra left, and I remained sitting on the bench overlooking the city.

Brothers, women can be so crazy. She goes ape shit for a guy who steals a couple of bottles of booze from a store. I’ve done stuff these last few months that would place me three decades behind bars. Then the corners of my eyes became watery.

I started to think about my dad. I babbled, "I'm sorry dad. I know you wanted me to do something with my life. I know you would be disappointed in me because I became a dirt bag thief." I folded my hands and looked up to the heavens, "But dad, my generation has it much tougher than yours. Don't worry dad. I'll make something of myself one day. Then I'll make amends for all my wrongs."

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## Chapter 14

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Brothers, I have never been so angry with a person in my life. I just wanted to grabbed the first stranger I saw by the throat and choke him to death. I should be furious with Steve. He can have any girl on campus, but he stepped into my world and stole my girl, but I wasn't furious with Steve. I should be angry with Phaedra for deceiving me and running after another guy, but good riddance to her. I suspected she was not a good girl, but my emotions covered my eyes. Of course, I was furious with Phaedra's father, the Dean. That bastard deliberately set me up, so he could embarrass me in front of everyone at his little cocktail party. That motherfucker!

So brothers, I waited until Sunday morning, when many students slept in late in their dorm rooms, recuperating from a weekend of binge drinking.

I slipped on my old clothes and headed out. I walked around the campus for a while letting the cool autumn air cool me off. Then I headed straight to the business building around 8:30. I slipped into a classroom at the back of a building with a row of windows that looked out at the lawn. I unlatched the last window, where a large bush blocked the window.

I wandered around campus for a while and returned for breakfast at the cafeteria.

Later that night, after the guards had made their routine patrol around campus and locked all the doors to the buildings, I walked to the building at eleven o'clock. I stood facing the front of the building for a moment. Then I walked to the side of the building and ducked behind that large bush, where I had left the window open. I scanned the area for any traffic. Satisfied no one was lurking around, I slipped on my gloves. I turned to face the window and pushed the window up.

Once I pushed the window to the top, I climbed inside. Then I closed and locked the window.

I walked to the front door of the Dean's office. I spun around and thrust a back kick at the door. Bam! The doorframe around the doorknob exploded into a cloud of splinters while the door slammed against the wall.

I walked in and closed the door behind me. I didn't see anything to steal at the secretary's desk, but brothers, I leave innocent people alone. I went to the Dean's door to his office and rammed my upper body into the door.

The door moaned and groaned. After my third attempt, the door yielded and broke open.

I entered and rummaged through the Dean's desk drawers.

Brothers, I'm not sure what happened, but I felt my insides turn to lava and gurgled through my bowels. I held my stomach to soothe those angry spasms, but it was too late. Those twelve atomic tacos drowned in hot sauce needed to make an emergency exit.

I quickly jumped onto the Dean's desk, dropped my drawers to my knees, and crouched while brown lava exploded out and splattered over Dean Tremaine's desk.

I squatted for five minutes, letting the last bits of the tacos drip out. After finishing, I pulled up my drawers and jumped off the desk. Then I spotted the antique alabaster chess set.

I removed my backpack. Then I folded and slid the board into the backpack. Then I dropped the gray and olive chess pieces into the front pockets.

I left the Dean's office. Once I made it to the corridor, I crouched low and tiptoed to the back door. I opened the door a little and peered out.

I didn't see anyone, so I pushed the door open and walked out while the door automatically closed and locked behind me.

I returned to an empty dorm room. Thank God, Drew was out. I went to the bathroom and removed my clothes and soiled underwear and carefully placed my underwear in the wastebasket. I showered and washed all the nasty crevices on my body. After I had dressed in fresh clothes, I took the small trashcan straight to the dumpster behind the dormitory.

I returned and lied on my stomach on my bed and read a textbook.

Drew scampered in around twelve thirty.

"Hey, Jax."

"Damn Drew. Did you go swimming in a lake filled with alcohol?"

"Oh, you've missed a killer party."

"I know. I had to stay here and study. I have an exam to study for."

Drew collapsed onto his bed with his feet hanging over the side.

I turned to look at him, "Did you finish your psych assignment?"

Drew opened a textbook, but his head started wobbling until his head collapsed on it.

I shook my head back and forth while mumbling, "How'd you get that scholarship?" Then I went to bed.

Early the next morning, I grabbed the antique chess set, the gun, the stolen checks, and the commemorative two-dollar bill I had taken from the grocery store and slipped them into my backpack. I went downstairs to eat breakfast. Afterwards I walked to the student athletic center and hid the whole backpack in the men's locker room. I chose a locker in the last aisle, where few patrons ventured.

I was ready to walk out.

"Jax. Jax."

I turned and saw David.

"Hey, David."

"It's been a while. I haven't seen you around."

"I've been a little busy."

"That's great. I hate to ask, but do you have little time for a chat?"

I looked at my watch. Then I shrugged my shoulders. "I guess I have some time."

"Awesome. Let's go to my car."

We walked to his rusty maroon Buick, or at least I thought it was maroon, and climbed in.

David started, "Are you all set with the plans?"

"Oh, the plans? Yeah. Of course, I'm ready."

"Great. It's just I haven't seen you in a while. I've meant to catch up with you. That's why I'm glad I've ran into you at the gym."

I noticed David was driving the car out of town, "By the way, where're we going?"

"It's a surprise."

I pointed towards the back window, "Isn't the church back there?"

"Where not going to church today."

"We're not. Then where we going?"

"I've told you. I have a surprise for you."

David drove outside the city limits. Then he turned right on a dirt road that led into a mass of dark ominous looking trees.

Brothers, my heart started beating quicker, and I felt a panic attack coming, "Where' we going again?"

"We're almost here." Then he stopped the car.

David popped open the trunk, and we both got out. We both walked on our side of the car and went to the trunk.

I looked at David's face. Then I peered into the trunk.

David opened a silver, polymer case and revealed a handgun lying in the middle of the foam.

"What's that," I asked.

"A fourth generation Glock 17."

"Okay. I hate to be a bother, but what do you plan to do with that?"

"You need some target practice. You must get used to holding and shooting a gun." David pulled out a clipped and slid bullets into it. Then he grabbed the handgun and slapped the clip into it.

"For a Christian, you certainly come well-armed."

David smiled, "To do God's work, we must be strong, and nothing makes a man stronger than a well-chosen side arm."

"I know I'm a little rusty on the Bible. But did I overlook a chapter in the New Testament? When did Jesus ever use a weapon?"

David raised his eyebrows and frowned at me.

I raised my hands. "Sorry. I'm not sure why I said that."

"Jesus didn't live in our times. But if Jesus were alive today, I'm sure he would carry a Glock 17."

"Yeah, of course. When he's healing someone, he wouldn't want to get robbed."

David frowned again and asked, "Could you grab those empty cans?"

I grabbed the empty cans.

David slammed the trunk, and we walked farther into the woods.

David pointed in the distance, "Could you place those cans over there on that tree trunk?"

"Huh?" as I looked at the tree trunk that seemed too far away, a convenient place to hide a body. Then I stared at the handgun in David's hand.

David looked down at his hand, "Oh, I see." Then he handed me the gun, handle first. "You take this then."

I passed him the cans.

David walked to the tree trunk and lined the cans on it. Then he returned and stood behind me, "Okay, just aim the gun and shoot those cans."

I shot at the first can. Several splinters flew from the first tree to the left of the cans.

"Your shot's a little off." David placed his hand on my hand and guided the gun. "Just line up the sights at both ends of the gun. Then pull the trigger."

I pulled the trigger and this time, the bullet dug itself into the tree trunk below the cans.

"Better. Keep practicing."

Brothers, after an hour in the woods, I finally hit those cans.

"I think you're almost ready."

I looked at the empty shell casings on the ground. "That's too bad. It seems like I used up all your bullets."

"Don't worry. When doing God's work, God always provides."

"Okay. Then I can do God's work and kill the dean. Perhaps throw in a hockey captain too."

"Hockey captain? What's this about a hockey captain?"

"I'm having problems with the hockey team."

"I don't think that has anything to do with our mission. What has the hockey captain done?"

"They haven't won any games yet."

David laughed.

"Well, what if I shoot the Dean first and then the hockey captain?"

"I cannot condone the killing of an innocent person."

"Hey, wait a minute. You want me to kill the Dean, but not someone else."

“The Dean is the spawn of Satan. He must die.”

“But I’m willing to throw in the hockey captain for free.”

“Brother, this captain has nothing to do with us. Seriously, what’s your grievance with this hockey captain?”

I looked down towards the ground, “He stole my girl.”

“I didn’t know you were dating someone.”

“I was dating the Dean’s daughter, Phae-”

“Ugh, that’s Satan’s harlot.”

“Excuse me. What did you say? I don’t appreciate that reference you made about my girl.”

David placed his hand on my shoulder, “Brother, it’s good she left you. You have poor choice in women.”

“What are you talking about? I make fabulous choices in women.”

“Then ask her where she got her Delta Chi t-shirt.”

“Her what? I don’t understand.”

“I heard a rumor around campus that a fraternity will give a girl a free t-shirt with their insignia on it if she sleeps with at least ten fraternity brothers.”

I felt the heat pulsate in my face while I clenched my hand tighter around the gun. Although I’m out of bullets, I can still hit him on the head with the damn thing.

“Look, brother. I apologize for my harsh words. You just need to find yourself a strong Christian woman.”

“I don’t appreciate your tone and your inferences about my girl, Phaedra.”

David raised his hands in surrender, “Just forget what I said. Just focus on the primary target the dean. If you want to go after the hockey captain, then be my guest. But get the Dean first.”

I handed David the handgun, and we returned to the car.

On the way to town, I looked over at him, “Have you killed anyone before.”

David just stared at the road in front of him.

I added, "Well, I guess the Lord does work in mysterious ways."

David dropped me off at the front of my dorm.

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## Chapter 15

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Brothers, I stayed away from people for several days. Sometimes I felt good and forgot about my dead father and the devious Dean. Other times, when I was smiling and enjoying the company of others, sad memories would creep back into my mind. Then today, I just didn't feel well.

I hid in a dark corner of the cafeteria and ate my food. I couldn't even taste it. Then I strolled around campus for a while. I made my regular stop at the Math-Sciences building and dropped off several slices of ham stripped from several croissants for my furry friends who lived in the bushes. But the little guys just sniffed the ham and refused to take a bite. Like the students, they grew tired of the flat food that always tasted the same as the dish from the previous day, and it didn't matter if the cooks added noodles or rice, or shook in some different seasonings. The food always tasted the same.

I mumbled, "You guys tired of the food too. I can't blame you." I petted each one several times and turned to go and wandered towards the downtown.

I walked past the Library Bar and continued walking until I was on the street that followed along the river.

A white car screeched to a stop next to me. The driver screamed, "That's him."

Brothers, before I knew what had happened, Steve and his three buddies surrounded me. Steve thumped his index finger on my chest several times, "You don't look so tough now, do you?"

I counted, "One, two, three, four. Looks like a fair fight."

"Yeah, it's fair. We're gonna to beat the shit out of you."

I tried to move to the left, but his friend blocked my way.

"Where do you think you're going?" the friend yelled.

"I have some homework to do."

"No, I don't think so. We still have unfinished business to discuss." Steve screamed.

I started chuckling. "Really? Last time we talked business, you went swimming."

Steve's friend standing behind me punched me hard in the head while his other friend punched me on the side of the face.

Brothers, before I knew it, punches came from all directions, and I fell to the ground and cowered into a fetal position.

Steve kicked me in the ribcage, "You're not so smart now. You stay away from Phaedra. You got that."

I mumbled, "Yeah, I got it."

Brothers, I couldn't see, but someone kicked me in the ribcage again. Then Steve and his friends started laughing while they climbed into Steve's Mercedes. The car's tires squealed as the car sped away.

I propped myself into a sitting position while the world wobbled underneath me. I tried my best to hold myself up and not pass out. I can't afford a trip to the hospital.

A red compact car approached and then stopped. An overweight woman rolled down the car window, "Do you want me to call an ambulance?"

Finding all my inner strength, I made a shooing motion with my hand, "Please don't call an ambulance. I just tripped while jogging. I'll be fine."

She looked up and down at me, and replied, "Okay then," She rolled her window up and drove away.

Brothers, I'm not sure how I did it, but I propped myself onto my feet and limped home. At first, every limb hurt, but my inner drive refused to stop.

As I entered the dorm room, Drew jumped off the bed.

"Dude, what happened to you?"

"Nothing."

“What do you mean nothing? It looks like the football team used you as the football.”

“Well, I wouldn’t say the football team. I had a little chat with the hockey captain and three of his friends.”

Drew pulled up the sleeves on his shirts, “Let’s get some friends together and go after them.”

“No. Just let it go.”

“What? We can’t let them get away with this.” He punched his open hand, “We must hit hard and fast.”

“Don’t worry. I have a plan.”

“Dude, I hope it includes kicking the dude’s ass. You don’t let people push you around and use your face as a punching bag.”

I raised my hands in surrender, “Drew, just trust me, alright.”

“Then how can I help.”

“Well, I feel like shit. Do you have any aspirin? Or something stronger?”

Drew walked to his desk and pulled out the top drawer and dug around. Finally, he pulled out several travel packets of aspirin, probably the ones I bought for him, and tossed them to me.

I caught them and tore open the first packet. limping towards the bathroom, I said, “Thanks, man.” It took me an eternity to reach the sink, but I tossed the two tablets into my mouth. Then I turned on the water faucet and scooped some water into my mouth.

I opened the other aspirin package and plopped two more aspirins into my mouth.

It took another eternity to reach the shower, where I peeled off the dirty clothes from my body and stood in the shower while the steamy hot water massaged my body.

I dried myself and wrapped a towel around my waist. I peered in the mirror at the wreckage of my face – one black

eye, several dark bruises on one side of my cheek while the other side had swollen twice the normal size with a gash cut across it.

I returned to my bed to lay down.

Drew asked, "How'd you feel."

"You know, after that shower and aspirin, I feel pretty good."

"Good. Can you tell me why they beat you up?"

"I'm not sure. I guessed I heckled him too loudly at the hockey games."

"Yeah right. The team sucks. When do you ever go to any of their games?"

"Okay. It's not the heckling."

"Then what is it?"

"Look, I just don't want to say."

"Jax, we're friends. You have nothing to be ashamed of."

I looked down, "That's Phaedra's new boyfriend."

"What? Oh, I'm sorry dude."

"Don't worry about it."

"That bitch."

"I don't think she was part of it. It was just bad luck running into them in town."

"So, he beat you up because you're Phaedra's ex?"

"Well, I bumped into them at the party last Saturday night, and somehow Phaedra's boyfriend fell into the swimming pool."

"That's cool, but, dude, we still must teach them a lesson."

I said, "I know. I have a plan."

"Just holler if you need some help."

"Don't worry. I will." I lay in bed for an hour, maybe two hours and the pain begin to numb. I turned to Drew, who was lying down playing a game on his cell phone. "What's the time?"

“Ten-thirty,” he said as he looked over, “So how do you feel?”

I lied, “Ah, I feel much better.” Then I fell asleep. I woke around five o’clock in the morning.

As I slid out of bed, the side of my ribs hurt especially when I moved. My black eye darkened while my face was still swollen. But I felt much better.

I looked over at Drew and saw he was still sleeping.

I dressed. I grabbed some breakfast at the cafeteria and limped to the athletic department. I grabbed my backpack with the commemorative two-dollar bill, the stolen checks from the grocery store, the Dean’s antique chess set, and gun.

I walked to the block of fraternity houses. I never realized it until now, but Steve’s fraternity was next to my little church.

I looked around. Nothing moved around or near the campus. I approached a car in the parking lot and looked around again. Then I went to the driver’s side and opened the door. And, brothers, that’s the one good thing about small towns. Nobody locks their homes and cars. I pressed a button and the trunk popped open.

I slid along the car and bent over into the trunk and lifted the cover to the spare tire and placed the gun and stolen items into the cavity of the spare tire. Then I slammed the trunk shut and walked away.

Boy brothers, I felt much better.

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## Chapter 16

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Brothers, I jumped up and rubbed my eyes as someone stood outside and pounded on my door. He screamed, "Open up, now!"

Drew jumped up, "What the fuck?"

I my right eye flared up in pain as I rubbed my black eye by mistake.

Drew jumped out of bed and ran to the door.

The pounding continued.

Drew opened the door, "Guys, what the fuck? We're sleeping."

"Campus security."

"Oh."

"Are you Jax Gamble?"

"Ah, ah no. He's over there."

Before I could rise, two security guards stood at the end of my bed. "Are you Jax Gamble?"

I nodded my head up and down.

"Please come with us."

"May I inquire what this is about?"

"It is urgent that you speak with Dean Tremaine."

"Is it possible to meet him later?"

"Sir, that's not possible. You must come right now."

"Alright, alright. I swung out of bed and started putting on last night's clothes.

I walked by a pale white Drew, who stood there looking at me with wide eyes.

The security guards escorted me on both sides.

As we went through the hallways, students opened their doors slightly to see what the commotion was about.

We made it to the first stairwell and walked down. Then the security guards led me to their car. One guard scooted next to me while the other hopped in the driver's seat and drove away.

The guard parked at the fire hydrant at the back of the Business Building. Then they escorted me to Dean Tremaine's Office.

I glanced at the damage I did to both doors as we entered the Dean's office. The Dean sat at his desk and looked up as we entered.

One guard pulled out a chair, "Sit."

The Dean said, "Thank you gentlemen."

The guards left the office and closed the door behind them.

I looked at the Dean while he glared at me.

The Dean said, "I shall only ask you once. Did you break into my office last weekend?"

I shook my head and uttered, "No."

"May I enquire your whereabouts this past weekend?"

"You mean the whole weekend?"

The Dean snapped, "Yes, the whole weekend."

"Let me see. I've been at the dorms and the library. I think I walked to the downtown once or twice."

"Do you have a witness who could affirm and attest to your whereabouts?"

"I stay with my roommate Drew in the dorms. We'd eaten together a couple of times at the cafeteria last weekend."

"You can be frank with me. I am here to help you." Then the dean's grin widened.

"Thank you, sir. I know you want to help."

"Are you in possession of my antique chess set, or know who may have taken it by mistake?"

I shrugged my shoulders, "Nope. I don't have your chess set. Sir, I don't even play chess."

"We are very fortunate the suspect or suspects left a biological sample in my office. The police couriered the

sample to the state police headquarters for DNA testing." The Dean continued glaring at me.

"Really? What kind of biological sample?" I looked at the surface of the desk where I took a dump, and that must've been some radioactive tacos because my wastes had eaten some of the finish from his desk.

"By next week, we shall determine the culprits identity?"

Brothers, I will admit. The Dean's statement did frazzle me a little. I didn't think about the DNA test. *Oh bum-bailiff*. Could scientist extract DNA from feces?

"Do you grant the police permission to collect a DNA sample from you?"

I told myself, don't be nervous. Don't show any signs. Just be cool. I looked into the Dean's eyes, "That shall be no problem." I rolled up my sleeve, "They can try to take blood from my arm if they want, but the university has already sucked me dry."

The Dean pointed his finger at me, "If I can prove that you had broken into my office, I will expel you from the university. I will ensure that criminal record follows you for the rest of your life, and not a single university in this great country will entertain your admission."

I just sat there and glared at the Dean.

"But if you cooperate with the investigation, I may convince the disciplinary board to place you on probation, and you have the possibility to continue your studies."

Brothers, I know I would be a real dumbass to confess now. If the Dean really had anything, the police would detain me. Besides, I didn't trust the dean. I knew he was a lying, conniving bastard who will say anything to extract a confession from me. Then he would expel me from the university and ruin the rest of my life.

“This is your last chance to show your dignity and admit to your mischief.”

Brothers, I was scared. I looked down at my trembling arms and crossed them in front of me. I told myself, don't show fear in front of adversity, “I don't know what you're talking about. If you want to expel me, go ahead and expel me. But I'll hire an attorney and sue the university.”

The Dean continued staring at me.

I continued, “Lawsuits can create bad publicity for the university. Bad publicity could harm careers of deans aspiring to be university presidents.”

“Young man, you have chosen strong words.”

“Are we done here? I've done nothing wrong. May I go now?”

“I have not concluded my investigation. May I ask how you sustained those injuries on your face?”

“I tripped while I was jogging yesterday.”

The Dean smirked and quickly covered his mouth with his hand. Then he made a shooing motion with his hand, “You may go for now, but mister, we are not through.” Then he pointed his finger at me, “I will find out who vandalized my office and stolen my prized chess set. Do you understand me?”

“Good luck with your investigation.” I rose and left the Dean's office. As I walked outside the door, one of the guards snapped, “Jax Gamble, come with us.”

“Gentlemen, where're we going?”

The two security guards escorted me to the car. We all climbed into the car.

Brothers, I'm not sure why I said it, but I said it, “Could we go through the McDonald's drive-thru and get a Sausage McMuffin with cheese?”

One guard looked at me, "You'll get all the sausage McMuffin in the shower room at the Hudson state correctional facility.

Both guards started chuckling.

"I'll pass on your kind offer," I said, but brothers, these pricks would not serve me breakfast. Instead, we drove to the Campus Security's headquarters, hidden on the other side of campus near the campus warehouses.

The guards led me into their office, where we sat at an ancient wooden table that the university probably found at a landfill.

One guard asked, "Would you like some coffee?"

"Sure, why not."

He placed a Styrofoam cup of coffee in front of me, and I took a sip and winced. I asked, "Do you have a license to sell that stuff. It's quite strong."

"Let's get down to business. Were you near or inside the business building at any time this past week?"

"Of course, I go there about ten times a week. Most of my classes are there."

"I mean this weekend?"

"The business building? I don't recall. I don't think so."

"Do you give us permission to search your dorm room?"

"Why do you want to do that?"

"We ask the questions here. Do you give us permission to search your dorm room?"

"Sure, why not? I have nothing to hide."

One guard scooted back on his chair, went to his desk, and browsed through some papers. Then he returned to the table and placed a consent-to-search form in front of me and put a pen across it.

I picked up the pen and scribbled my signature.

The guard took the paper and left the room.

I took another sip of my coffee, “Hey, this coffee’s not bad. May I get another?”

“You should take these proceedings seriously. You are facing several serious charges – breaking and entering a public building, felonious theft of state property, defacing state –”

“It sounds like I better get another cup of coffee then. We’ll be here all day.”

The guard’s face reddened, “defacing state property. Failing to comply with a police investigation.”

“I don’t want to sound rude or anything, but you guys are not real police officers.”

The guard grinned, “Well smart guy. You don’t know much about the state law. We’re certified by the state as police officers.”

“What? I didn’t realize that. May I ask, why does a university need real police officers?”

The guard pointed at the certificates hanging on the wall near his desk.

I looked at the certificates, “Wow, you’re trained as a professional interrogator. Why does the university need a trained interrogator?”

“To fight crime.”

“I didn’t realize the university had such a crime problem as to necessitate the hiring of a professional interrogator.”

The guard stared at me.

I looked at the officer, “It sounds like I need a lawyer.”

The guard laughed.

“I want an attorney present. You also didn’t read my Miranda rights?”

“Miranda who?” The guard kept laughing.

I continued, “Then whatever information you get from this interrogation will not be admitted in a court of law.”

"Then you should have read the form you signed. You waived your Miranda rights when you signed the consent to search form."

"I would like to leave."

"After you give a DNA sample?"

"I don't think so."

"Ah, so you're guilty?"

"No, I'm not guilty."

"An innocent person wouldn't hesitate to give a DNA sample or comply with an investigation."

"Okay then. Go ahead and take a sample."

The guard looked surprised. Then he rose and walked to his desk and retrieved a plastic bag. He pulled out a cotton swab, "Open your mouth."

Brothers, I'll admit. I knew the security guards would find no link between me and my mischief except that DNA sample that I left cooling on Dean Tremaine's desk. *Clatterfart!* Damn those atomic tacos.

I opened my mouth while he brushed the swab along my gums. Then he deposited it into a plastic vial.

He placed a form in front of me, "Sign it."

I read the document this time. As I was signing the form, I asked, "Oh yeah. The Dean said something about a biological sample. What was the sample?"

"We're not at liberty to say."

The guard placed the DNA kit on his desk, and he sat at the table again right across from me, "Do you consent to a polygraph test?"

"No, I do not consent."

"Ya know, an innocent person would not hesitate to take a polygraph test to prove his innocence."

"That's not true. I know lie detector tests are not admissible in a court of law."

"Well, whoever told you that was wrong?"

“Oh come on. A university professor taught us that last week in psychology class. Those tests are unreliable.”

“Psst. What do professors know? Those tests are ninety-five percent accurate.”

“No, my professor said the tests are accurate anywhere between forty and seventy percent.”

“Your professor is wrong.”

“He’s not wrong. He also has no incentive to lie or mislead suspects.”

“We have a trained expert in polygraph testing. He said it’s ninety-five percent accurate.”

“It doesn’t matter. They’re still not admissible in a court of law.”

“Yes, they are.”

Right then brothers, I knew. The police will lie to suspects if they think it strengthens their case. That was the technique of interrogation – just get the defendant to talk. It doesn’t matter what the defendant says. The police will record everything accurately and scrutinize every word the defendant has uttered. If the police find one discrepancy, never mind how small or insignificant that discrepancy, the defendant is charged with perjury. But if the police lie, that’s okay. They’re doing their job, protecting the public from the criminals.

The guard asked, “Do you consent to a polygraph test?”

I looked down at the table and kept my mouth shut.

The guard studied me.

I stopped talking, and we looked at each other for about thirty minutes. Then the other guard returned.

“Did you find any evidence?”

“Nope. He’s clean.”

I said, “I want to leave.”

“You may go, at least for now.”

“Could one of you give me a lift to the dorm?”

The guards started laughing.

"What's so funny? You guys brought me here. It would be polite to return me where you found me."

When they stopped laughing, one security said, "Sure. I'll take you back when I go to lunch. Just wait outside by the door."

I looked at the clock on the wall, "I supposed you don't have lunch around 10 o'clock."

"Nope. Sometimes twelve or later."

"Thanks for the offer." I walked to the dorm. As I entered the familiar halls of the dormitory, students looked away when they saw me approaching. As I had passed them, they would stare at me.

As I walked into the dorm room, Drew looked over, "Dude, what the fuck happened? Everybody is talking about you. A security guard searched our dorm room."

"Apparently, someone broke into the Dean's office this weekend."

"No way."

"I know, it's unbelievable."

"So the Dean thinks you broke into his office?"

"I believe he does."

"Wow, dude. You're in real shit now."

"I know. Could it get any worse?"

"I mean look at this place? Who's going to clean this up?"

I looked around. Every drawer was pulled opened and all the contents dumped onto the floor. Everything was pulled out of the closet and tossed on the room's floor.

"Thanks for the concern about my safety."

"Your safety. You're the one who had to fuck with the Dean and his daughter."

"But I said I didn't do it."

"You still went for his daughter."

“Alright. Alright. Don’t worry. I’ll tidy up.”

Drew started smiling. Then he asked, “So, what was stolen?”

“I think the Dean said an antique chess set. And a biological sample.”

“A biological sample?”

“Yup, a biological sample.”

“What was the nature of the biological sample?”

The police would not say, but they rushed it to the state capital for DNA testing.”

“Damn, DNA test. You must be shitting your pants?”

“Nope. I’m not worried.”

“So where’d you hide the chess set?”

“C’mon man. If I had the chess set, don’t you think the police would have found it? Look at this place.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right. Well, I’m going to lunch. And I want this room spotless before I return.”

“Yes, momma.”

Drew stomped out of the room and slammed the door shut. Brothers, who could blame Drew? He left for lunch and left me behind.

I pulled out my cell phone and surfed the internet for the feces’ question. Brothers, believe it or not, scientists can recover DNA from fecal matter. Wow, who knew? Note to self, don’t leave any biological samples behind on future transgression of the law.

I put my phone on the desk, plopped several more tablets of aspirin into my mouth, and started putting everything back where it belonged. Even Drew’s mood improved when he returned to the dorm room and saw the spotless room. Of course, the room was much cleaner now than before the security guards had arrived.

Of course, my notoriety dissipated quickly over the next several days as everyone fell into routine at the dorm. I

guess the Dean would bruise his inflated ego if he reported the break-in to the police or upper management. How could he let a student get the best of him? So he used the security guards to scare me into confessing. I guess that's why the Dean waited several days before playing that little charade. At least I don't have to worry about scientists at the state capital analyzing my feces for evidence. Hopefully, the state has more serious crimes to investigate.

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Brothers, I needed to do some good deeds this week—you know, help cancel out the bad stuff I did last week, so I went to volunteer at homeless center on Saturday. Of course, I knew it would be awkward to run into Phaedra, but I was also curious about how she would react. I wonder if she still found me boring?

As I entered the dining room at the homeless center, Phaedra glanced in my direction and looked away.

I stood behind the buffet table next to Phaedra. We didn't even exchange hellos or anything nor did I look at her the whole time we served the needy.

The train of homeless men formed a line. Phaedra placed noodles on a plate while I drenched a chicken gravy with vegetables over the top. Then I added a piece of corn bread to the side and passed the plate to an opened hand.

We served the homeless people for over hour. I took my lunch break and grabbed a plate of food and formed a mountain of noodles and chicken gravy. Then I built a small pyramid of cornbread at the side. Then I sat down across from a scav while Phaedra ran into the kitchen.

"Hey, that's not fair," he said.

I looked at him, "What's not fair?"

"You got four pieces of cornbread."

“Well, I work here, so I’m allowed extra portions.”

“That’s not fair?”

I picked up my fork and stabbed some noodles coated with gravy and plopped it into my mouth. “Because I took a day off from my busy schedule to volunteer here. The center does not pay me for my time, so I think I earned that extra portion of cornbread.”

“Yeah, you think you’re special because you go to that fancy college.”

“What does college have to do with fairness or my cornbread?”

“You think you’ve better than us.”

I sighed. Then I pushed my plate towards him and turned the plate so the pyramid of cornbread was closest to him, “Help yourself then.”

The homeless guy smiled. He pulled out a plastic bag and grabbed all my cornbread and placed it carefully into the bag. Then he slid the bag into his jacket pocket.

“Thanks for leaving me some cornbread.” I scooted my plate towards me and started eating my noodles and gravy.

“You work here. You can always get more. You’re entitled to it.”

I returned to the buffet line and grabbed a slice of cornbread from a large cookie sheet while Phaedra returned.

“Jax, I need to speak to you?”

“I don’t know. I’m not liking the tone in your voice. Plus, I’m trying to enjoy my cornbread.”

“It’s important.”

I bit into my cornbread, chewed, and swallowed, “Okay, go ahead.”

“Did you break into daddy’s office and steal his chess set?”

I looked Phaedra straight into her eyes, “No, I didn’t. Besides, he’s rich. He can always buy another one.”

"Not this one. It was a gift from his grandfather."

I picked up another piece of cornbread and started eating it.

"Do you know anyone who could've done this?"

"No, I don't but don't worry. I'm sure it was a childish prank. Why don't you ask Steve? Where was he last weekend?"

Phaedra looked away.

"We already know he has a history of stealing."

"I was with Steve all weekend."

"Oh. I see he has an ironclad alibi. Like I said, don't worry. I'm sure your dad will get his chess set back."

Phaedra looked at me, "What happened to your eye and cheek?"

I rubbed my eye for emphasis, "Oh, this? It's nothing. Don't worry about it."

"It looks like you've been in a fight."

"Oh no. A few days ago, I was walking downtown and slipped on the sidewalk and crashed to the ground."

"You sure you weren't in a fight."

"Oh please, I've got no enemies in this town, except maybe your father."

Phaedra stormed away and left me by myself to clean the whole dining room. So I took my time and cleaned everything until it sparkled.

I strolled into the kitchen and saw the tray of cornbread with three slices left.

Raymond came out of the tiny kitchen office, "Help yourself to some cornbread. Otherwise, I have to throw it out."

"You know it's not Christian-like to waste food especially with the numerous homeless people in town."

"And don't forget the hungry students. Help yourself to some cornbread."

“Amen, brother.” I grabbed the last slices and piled them on a napkin and slipped them into my jacket pocket. I would eat these on my long walk back to campus.

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## Chapter 17

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Well, brothers, I didn't want to do another break-n-take, but I planned my finale. Come on, this was the perfect time to do my last break in. Campus security already had investigated me and searched my dorm room while Dean Tremaine hadn't found a way to touch me, or at least he hasn't yet. Then I could retire in style. Every criminal dreams they'll become rich after doing their last score, and they could retire on a tropical island and enjoy their last days on earth. I was no different. Of course, I knew my last score wouldn't include a trip to a tropical island or frolicking with dancing girls at the nightclub, but a tuition bill will still loom over my head next semester. Then I could find a job next summer.

I knew Phaedra watches her neighbor's home from time to time when he leaves town. I suspected he had some serious cash piled a mile high in that wall safe of his. People always think they're clever by hiding a safe behind a painting. At nighttime, I would take a nightly stroll across the suspension bridge and through Phaedra's neighborhood. I would survey the area and note everything I could. Of course, I had to blend in and be inconspicuous, so Phaedra didn't think I was stalking her. Who knows, perhaps I was stalking her a little, or I was waiting to catch Steve at the right time, so I could finish the conversation this time.

Over the course of several days, I noticed the empty driveway and several newspapers jutting from the top of an overflowing mailbox.

Brothers, it was time to make my move. I walked to the hillside park at nighttime, where Phaedra and I shared our first kiss and sat on a park bench until midnight. I knew the hockey team played tonight, so Phaedra probably wouldn't be at the house.

I walked down the street during a chilly autumn night. The trees shed their canopy of bright colored leaves that covered the ground. I shivered a little as a cold wind blew while its icy fingers danced up and down my spine. Winter was a couple of weeks away.

As usual, I wore the usual old clothes – the washed-out, torn blue jeans, a faded t-shirt, a black jacket, and a knit woven hat. All clothes I would throw away tomorrow. I walked by Phaedra's house, where someone, probably her father, left the front porch and back patio lights on. But Phaedra's house showed no signs of life.

I walked to the edge of the neighbor's driveway and looked both ways. Just a lonely dog barked in a distance. I jogged up the driveway and ducked behind the house, so no one could see me from the street.

I walked to the garage and peered through the window and saw a blank space where the owner would park his 2005 Cadillac Deville. I mumbled, "Great. He's gone."

I jogged to the back door of the house. Then a light clicked on in the living room.

I jumped a little and muttered, "What the fuck?"

I waited a minute to calm myself. Then I walked to the side of the house to get a better view of the living room. Peering through the window, I saw no one there. As I stood on my tiptoes, I looked down where the lamp plugged into the wall.

I began smiling. The owner plugged the light into an electric motion detector. I wondered how many burglaries that cheap device had foiled.

I returned to the back door and slipped on my gloves. I picked up the doormat and laid it across the door's window near the door lock. Then I punched the mat.

The glass broke and fell inside while the doormat muffled the crash of broken glass.

I unlocked the door and entered the kitchen. Then I turned on my flashlight on my cell phone and tiptoed to the owner's study. I approached the horrible painting and flipped it open to reveal the wall safe.

I pulled out my crowbar and slammed the edge into the dry wall around the safe. Then I made another hole, then another, until I isolated the safe from the wall at least a foot. I used my hand to brush away the pieces of broken drywall. Then I shoved the crowbar behind the safe and pried it from the wall studs.

The wall safe dropped to the floor with a thump.

I picked up the safe and placed it upside down on the desk. Then I plunged the crowbar into the back of the safe and tore it open like a tin can of tuna.

After I had made a gapping hole, large enough for my hand to fit in, I began pulling out papers and documents and placed them onto a pile on the desk. Then I wiggled out a stack of money and shoved it into my pocket.

Then, brothers, I heard the squeal of car brakes while headlights danced across the walls.

"Oh shit."

I ran to the back door and saw a Buick pull into the driveway while the automatic garage door started to open.

I shoved my cell phone into my pocket. Then I ran to the front door and opened it and ran into the front porch. I jiggled the doorknob, but it wouldn't unlock. Then I looked at the door. The owner bolted the door permanently shut and turned the porch area into a storage room.

I flipped open a latch on a window and tried to open it, but it wouldn't open. Then I saw that bastard had nailed all the porch windows shut.

The garage door began closing while the owner opened the back door and screamed, "If ya still here, I'm armed."

I used my elbow to smash the window. Once I pushed all the shards of glass out, I jumped through the window head first and landed in the bushes.

The owner appeared at the window, "Stop, or I'll shoot."

Brothers, I do not know if it was my imagination or if the cold air and adrenaline amplify sound, but I heard the distinct click of a gun as someone pulls the hammer back to place a bullet in the chamber. I jumped up and bolted through the owner's bushes.

A screaming bullet flew through the air above my head while an explosion from the gun woke up the entire neighborhood.

As I ran along Phaedra's street, all her neighbors began turning on the house and porch lights. So many lights were turning on, it was almost as bright at noon time.

I ran and ran until I reached the hillside park. I stopped to catch my breath. Looking behind me, I saw approaching headlights, "Shit!"

I ran down the stairs.

Above me, a voice screamed, "Hey you."

Another bullet whizzed by and ricocheted off the stone wall as another explosion filled the neighborhood.

In the distance, I heard police sirens coming from multiple directions.

I made it to the street and looked at the suspension bridge in front of me. No way could I cross it in time. Even Jesse Owens couldn't run fast enough across the bridge to escape from a raving lunatic shooting a gun.

I took a left and ran along the sidewalk as another police siren came from the suspension bridge.

I ran a block and then ran across the street until I reached the edge of trees.

When I turned around to look, the driver of the red Buick slammed on the brakes. Then two police cars stopped

on both sides of the Buick. The driver and police jumped out of their cars.

The Buick driver yelled, "He's over there," as he pointed in my direction.

I ran through the trees until I reached the river, "Oh fuck. What do I do now?"

Through a bullhorn, the police screamed, "We have you surrounded. Come out with your hands up."

Oh, brothers, I stared at the freezing, sparkling ripples of the river. Then I glanced at the tree line from where I came. It's now or never. I ran into the river while dragging a large branch. *Fuksheet, the river's freezing!* Once I made it in waist high, I crawled onto the branch and started paddling. My body shook and shivered from the cold waters. Damn, I'm going to freeze to death.

"This is your last warning. Come out with your hands up."

Brothers, I forgot how cold it was and started swimming faster to the other side.

The river's current swept me and carried me for a ride.

A spotlight began sweeping across the waters.

I turned and saw several shadows standing where I had jumped into the water. Then the waters around me lit up as the spotlight had found me.

I swam and swam while the suspension bridge was approaching fast from above.

Approaching the bridge, I heard voices above me as another spotlight danced across the water.

"There he is."

The river's current carried me under the bridge.

I saw a small log caught on the side of the tower foundation. I grabbed the log.

Brothers, I was shivering so badly, I thought icicles crystalized in my blood and would clog my heart.

I wiggled the log back and forth and managed to free it. Then I hid underneath it where the log branched into two limbs.

As I cleared the bridge, a spotlight lit up the log and followed its course. I ducked my head under water. I do not know why I looked down but when I did I could swear I saw my father below me. He looked happy as he waved at me to come closer.

Brothers, I wanted to swim down and join him. Then a pain shot through my body and I lurched above the water surface, gasping for air. I looked into the waters below me but only saw blackness.

On the other side of the bank, two more spotlights searched the waters.

I remained under the log until I had passed the city limits. Then I swam to shore on the other side.

Once I left the waters, the autumn breeze blew and I shivered like I had never shivered before. It felt like the temperature had dropped to absolute zero.

I ran into the woods as my shoes slogged while my jeans squeaked. Once I made it to the trees, the trees provided some protection me from the freezing breeze.

I stopped to catch my breath. Then I took off all my clothes, even my underwear. I wrung as much water as I could as I twisted and squeezed each article of clothing. Then I put on each piece of clothing one by one.

I pulled my dead cell phone from my pocket and looked at it. Brothers, I bet my warranty doesn't cover slight water damage. Then I chucked it as far as I could into the woods.

I pulled out the stack of money and examined it. It was all fifties and hundreds. I shoved it into my pocket and continued walking through the woods.

After an hour, I reached the highway that led out of town. Then I walked along the tree line and followed the road back into town.

A car approached, so I ran into the woods and hid behind a tree.

A police car slowly drove along the road as the cop sitting on the passenger side moved a spotlight along the rows of dark trees.

Once the road became quiet again, I continued walking to town.

Approaching the town's outskirts, I ran across the road. Brothers, I walked and walked and followed the outer perimeter of the town towards the university. Then I heard a pack of barking dogs in the distance. I kept walking.

Finally, the sunlight began pushing back the shadows of the woods as rays of komorebi filtered through the tree limbs and leaves. Oh, brothers, I dropped to the ground and kissed it. Then I continued walking until I made it to the edge of the campus. Low and behold, I stood staring at the massive building that housed the student athletic center.

Brothers, I had nothing to do except wait until the athletic center opened at seven.

I walked deeper into the woods and saw a large log lit by the morning sun. I went and sat on the log. I pulled out the bundle of money and counted it. I whistled - three thousand and five hundred dollars.

I folded the money and tucked it under a large rock near the log. Then I covered the rock with a blanket of leaves, "That way, no one will steal my money." Then I waited until the student center opened.

I spotted some students walking to the center and entered its doors.

I walked down and entered the building with them.

I approached a young female student sitting behind the counter. All the students in my group flashed their student IDs and walked past with saying a word.

When it was my turn, I said in my chirpiest voice, “Good morning.”

“Good morning. May I see your student id?”

I made the motion to search all my pockets. Then I plastered a fake surprise on my face, “Oops, it looks like I left my ID at the dorm.”

“I’m sorry, but I can’t let you in.”

“Please don’t make me walk back to my dorm room to get it.”

“I’m sorry, but I must follow university policy – no ID, no admittance.”

I pulled out my dorm room key, “See, I stay in Halverson Hall.”

She looked at the key, “Ok. I’ll just let you in just this time.” Then she looked at my damp clothes.

I made the motion as if I was jogging in place, “Just a little morning run before class.”

The girl turned up the volume of a small radio that she placed on the counter. The radio jockey announced, “We’re speaking to the chief of police. Sir, have you found the suspect yet?”

“We are still searching the river and its banks for the suspect. We believe the suspect may have drowned when he tried to swim across the river last night.”

“Do you believe the suspect acted alone or is working with a gang?”

“We’re investigating all the possibilities. We’ll know more once we find the body. The police dive team is combing the waters.”

I asked, “What’s going on?”

"The police think a burglar drowned in the river last night."

"Really? I didn't think this town had any crime."

"Yeah, I know. It's the first time something like this happened in this town."

"Well, I hope the police catch the bastard or bastards."

I headed to the men's locker room and went to my locker. I removed all my clothes and piled them on the bench. I pulled out my towel, shampoo, and soap from my locker and sprinted for the showers.

Brothers, once the hot sprays of the shower hit my body, I felt the steam lift me up high in the sky and bask and caress me in the rainbows of heaven. I easily stood in that shower for three hours.

When I returned to my locker, I felt renewed. I even smiled when I put on my damp, dirty clothes.

I walked to the cafeteria and grabbed a little breakfast. Brothers, even the breakfast tasted better - the soggy toast, the rubbery eggs, and cardboard pucks they call sausage. I just couldn't get enough as I shoveled the food into my mouth by the truckloads.

Drew spotted me and sat across from me, "Dude, what happened to you last night?"

"Oh man, you wouldn't believe me even if I told you."

"Try me."

"Wow. Last night, I went to the Doghouse. Woo-wee, you wouldn't believe the skanks that were there last night."

"I've been there. I know."

"I met one last night. I think her name was Debbie or was it Dawn or something."

Drew started laughing, "Dude, you can't even remember her name."

"After some serious drinking -"

"Yeah, yeah, go on."

“We went back to her place.”

“And.

“I fell asleep.”

“What? You fell asleep?”

“What can I say?”

“Loser.”

“Unfortunately, it’s the story of my life.”

“At least you have gotten over Phaedra?”

“Phaedra who?”

“You know, your... Oh, gotcha. Well, at least you’ve moved on.”

“Of course. I still have another three, four, or ten years of college to meet someone else.”

Drew studied my clothes, “So, what happened to your clothes?”

I looked down at myself, “I guess the girl’s place was not that clean.”

Drew started laughing. Once he settled down, he asked, “By the way, did you hear the news this morning?”

“You mean the burglar who drowned in the river?”

“Yeah, you heard then.”

“Of course I heard. Everyone’s talking about it.”

“I know it’s crazy.”

“Nah, it’s probably some drug addicts needing a fix.”

Drew squinted his right eye and raised his left eyebrow, “Yeah, you’re probably right, or a poor college student needing a little financial aid money.”

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Brothers, I still didn’t replace my cell phone. Of course, I wasn’t expecting any calls from anyone anyway, so why be in a hurry to replace it. I didn’t think the Michigan Lottery Commission was pounding on my door or calling me to

hand me a check for a million dollars. But I don't expect to win. I don't even buy lottery tickets anyway.

I returned to the dorm room.

Drew started, "Dude, your mom's been trying to reach you since morning."

"My mom?"

"She called three times so far."

"Thanks."

The phone started ringing, and Drew left the room.

"Hello."

"Jax, honey. I'm worried about you. I've been trying to reach you all day."

"Mom, everything's fine."

"I tried to call you on your cell phone, but you didn't answer."

"Sorry, mom. My phone was damaged."

"Damaged? How? What happened?"

"Oh, nothing mom. I left it in my jean's pocket and it went through the washing machine."

I didn't feel good lying to my mom, but I couldn't tell her the truth. Hey mom, guess what? I'm the town burglar. I was almost caught last week, but I swam across a cold river after midnight and foiled the apprehensive by the police. Now mom, because of me, everyone locks their doors at night.

"Did you return it to the service center?"

"Mom, the warranty doesn't cover water damage."

"I just had these strange thoughts that you were in trouble."

"No mom. Everything's fine. I'm almost finished my first semester of college. Final exams are next week."

"Are you sure everything's fine? I can't lose both -."

"Mom, everything's fine. Don't worry, I'll get another phone. Okay."

"Are you coming home for Christmas?"

"I don't know. I'll call in a week or two and let you know."

"Mom, I must go. I must study for my final exams."

"Jax. I worry about you."

"I worry about you too mom. Mom, I'll call you later."

"I love you Jax."

"Love you mom."

Brothers, I didn't think I would return home for Christmas. I know my mom needs me, but I just couldn't return home for Christmas - the first Christmas without my father. I just couldn't walk into the quiet house and pass the door to the empty spare bedroom where my dad spent his final days. Besides, I felt something big was charging at me.

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## Chapter 18

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Brothers, I can't believe it. It has been two weeks since my failed break in, and every time, I hear a slamming door echo in the dorm's corridors, I jump. I thought the police would be pounding on my door to arrest me, but they never came.

This morning, who would ever know I would wake up and the next few hours would change my life, plus the lives of others. Today started like any other day in this boring, tiny town except I slept in on this particular day.

I woke up and saw the clock displayed 1:00 pm. I jumped out of bed, showered, dressed, and ran to the cafeteria.

I grabbed a tray of slop-glop and lined up five extra-strong black coffees in a row.

I dumped a healthy layer of ketchup onto my food and spoon-fed myself.

A student sitting at the next table shouted, "I can't believe the university will raise tuition next year." Then he pounded his fist onto the table, "Damn, those greedy bastards."

Quietness invaded the cafeteria as everyone turned to look at the disruptive student.

Someone shouted, "Greedy admin. I even heard the university president and dean gave themselves raises."

Another shouted, "Yeah, they stole their raises from the students."

I shouted, "I hear you, brothers. I can't afford it either." I stood up and pointed at my food, "And look at the crap they serve us. We pay a fortune to eat here, but they herd us like pigs and feed us slop."

Another student screamed, "We should do something about it?"

I stood up on my chair and addressed the crowd, “I agree. We must do something. I’m a reporter for the university newspaper. Those bastards in the administration made me publish a false news story that stated students were ecstatic about next year’s tuition hike.” I scanned the crowd, “And let me tell you, most students are furious about next year’s tuition hike including me.”

Every student began screaming and chanting, “Fuck the administration.”

After the crowd had quieted, I pointed to a male student to my left, “What do you think? Are you happy with the tuition hike?”

“Hell no.”

I pointed at another, “What about you? Are you happy?”

“No. I can’t afford it.”

Then I pointed at another to my right, “What about you?”

“Fuck no. I’ve paid enough.”

“I’m with you. I’m tired too, to feed those fat cats in the administration. We must stand up for ourselves. We must make sure the bastards in the university hear our voices. The admin cannot silence us. They can’t plant fake stories in the newspaper. They can’t bully us to force us to pay more. We must fight for what we believe in. We must stand against the administration.”

I stepped onto the table. “So who’s with me?”

Many from the crowd yelled, “We are.”

I pointed at a person towards the back, “Are you with us?”

“Hell yeah.”

I pointed at another, “What about you. Will you stand with us, and fight this corrupt administration?”

“Yes. Until the end.”

I looked at the swinging kitchen doors and saw one kitchen staff standing by the door twitching nervously. Another staff pulled her cell phone out and called someone, probably my buddies from campus security.

I continued, "We must protest against next semester's tuition hike. Call all your friends and tell them to meet us at the front of the business building. Then we'll inform Dean Tremaine, the next university president, what we think of his tuition hike."

I stepped down on the chair and then onto the floor and marched out. Most of the students followed me in unison as we marched to the business building.

When we left the cafeteria, I looked behind me and saw about fifty students. By the time we approached the business building, the crowd swelled to hundreds.

I ran up the steps to the business building and tried to open the door, but the campus security guards locked the doors and stood on the other side of the doors in a row.

I turned to face the crowds and said, "Look at Dean Tremaine. He's afraid of us. He hides behind his security guards. The administrators are also afraid of us. They can sit behind closed doors and plot a massive tuition hike, but once the students start protesting, they cower under their desks and shake with fear. They even have the security guards block and lock the doors. Look, they are a bunch of cowards, escaping the pan pandemonium. They don't want to hear us. They don't want to hear our voices. Those bastards just want to steal more money from us."

Oh, brothers, it was a remarkable sight as I looked at the surging, angry crowds and within fifteen minutes, the whole student body stood in unison against the university.

I continued, "Those administrators made me published a fake newspaper article. They said the students were happy with the tuition hike. They said they would offer more

scholarships. They said their job was to help and educate students. But they sit in their fancy offices, earn their humongous salaries, and drink gourmet coffees. They prop their feet onto their desks and laugh at us. They think we are a bunch of weak, gullible students who will do anything to get that diploma. When a student comes in need and asked for help, the administrator invents a rule to shoo the student away.”

I tapped the side of my forehead with my index finger several times, “Think about this for a second. The university cannot control its spending. We know how much we pay, but we don’t know where the money goes. The university is as transparent as a barrel of turds. The administration uses convoluted logic. For example, if the university raises tuition and increases the scholarships by the same amount, how could the university gain anything? However, the university never published the number of the scholarships it will dough out. For the university to squeeze more money from us, it needs to offer fewer scholarships. It’s just a politician’s empty promise. A façade. So what do we tell those greedy administrators?”

The crowd shouted, “No tuition hike!”

“I don’t think they heard you. Tell them again what you think about next year’s tuition hike?”

The crowd shouted louder, “No tuition hike!”

Five police cars arrived. The police parked their squad cars with flashing red and blue lights on the edge of the crowd. Then cops lined up on the edge of the crowd.

Ten minutes later, Channel 5 News van pulled to the edge of the crowd.

I continued, “The administrators cannot hear you. They are sipping their champagne as a string quartet plays classical music in the corner of their offices. What do you say about next year’s tuition hike?”

The crowd screamed, "No tuition hike. No tuition hike..."

The crowd and I raised our right fists. We were united. We were strong. We shouted, "No tuition hike," as we pumped our right fists up and down.

We kept chanting, "No tuition hike."

A contingent of security guards walked to the top of the steps. The chief security guard addressed the crowd with a bullhorn, "Students, the administration hears you. Please disperse and return to your studies."

"Booooooooooooo," the crowd shouted in unison.

Three police officers walked through the crowds and joined the security guards at the top of the steps. The higher-ranking officer addressed the crowd, "Students, you must disperse. You do not have a permit to assemble a rally."

The crowds hissed, "Booooooooo," again.

I raised my hands and the crowd became quiet again. "Can you believe these guys? Dean Tremaine is afraid to address you, so he sent these jokers in uniform to intimidate you. So what do we say to Dean Tremaine?"

"No tuition hike. No tuition hike..."

The crowds continued to swell. When I looked out to the crowd, I could see a dense forest of students. Brothers, I didn't think this campus had this many students. Perhaps, the students from the neighboring colleges arrived to join our protest, or the high school students wanted a taste of college.

Brothers, we were all frustrated. We were all furious. We were all united. Those bastards in the administration drove us to our breaking point. And on several occasions, it looked that it would turn ugly. Several troublemakers hurled rocks at the police officers and police cars while others tipped over trashcans.

Dean Tremaine, finally, appeared on the other side of the glass doors of the business building.

The crowds hissed, “Booooooo.” Then they chanted in unison, “Go home Dean Tremaine. Go home Dean Tremaine...”

A security guard unlocked one of the doors and the Dean stepped outside surrounded by the security guards.

The crowds continued hissing, “Go home Dean Tremaine.”

The dean raised the bullhorn, “Students, the administration has heard you. We know you are frustrated. We know you are upset about next year’s tuition enhancement.”

The crowds became quiet.

The Dean continued, “The board of trustees met for an emergency meeting. The board has sided with you. They unanimously decided no tuition enhancement for next year. Please disperse. The students have won. Go back to your classes to study. The administration will not raise tuition next year. ”

The crowds began cheering and whistling.

Oh, brothers, when the crowds surged, I felt the pent up rage and frustration as if I was sitting on a mountain of dynamite, but once the president had uttered his words, that anger and frustration disappeared. Students began dispersing. The protest had ended.

I started to walk down the steps, but five police officers surrounded me.

I asked, “Is there a problem, officers?”

“You’re under arrest.”

“May I ask –” I was on the ground with my hands forced behind my back before I could finish my question.

Two officers helped me up and escorted me to the nearest police car.

"May I ask what I'm being arrested for?"

"Disturbing the public. Inciting a riot. Assembling a protest without a permit."

'Is that all?"

Oh, brothers, many students looked in my direction but no one came to my rescue. The students got what they wanted - no tuition hike. They were going to scamper back to their pathetic little lives and live in their small worlds like gerbils in a cage and act as if nothing happened.

The police slid me into the back seat of the squad car and slammed the door shut. Two officers sat in the front while one sat next to me.

I asked, "Do we have time to get some donuts and coffee? We can save time and go through the drive-thru."

The officer sitting on the passenger side turned to face me, grabbed the top of his nightstick for emphasis, and said. "Wait until we get you to the station, that's where your donut is waiting for you."

"Great, could I request a Bavarian cream filled."

"Sorry, kid. We only offer black and blue dowsed in pain."

I swallowed a dry lump.

Of course, we students should have known better. I learned the board of trustees are a bunch of lying motherfuckers. They didn't raise tuition by 15%. Instead, the bastards met during another emergency meeting during the summer and raised it by 5%. The students thought they had won, but they actually had lost. That rage and frustration never returned, or at least during my stint at the university.

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## Chapter 19

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Brothers, here I sit handcuffed to a chair in the interrogation room. I have no idea how long I've been here, stuck in this dark, windowless room with three chairs and a table. I could've been here for hours or days or decades. After each beating session, the cops would leave me alone for an hour or two or three – let some of the wound heal and some of the bruises fade. I stared at the wall with the see-through panel, and I just smiled and smiled. I refused to let these overpaid security guards push me around. Besides, brothers, I already know. If they had anything on me, they wouldn't try to coerce a confession out of me.

Two officers burst through the door. One officer looks like a nice guy, like the twin brother of my pastor at my church. The other one looks like he should be locked up in a cage with the wild grizzly bears at the zoo.

They always started out nice and acted like my best friends, who were trying to help me. Then it turned ugly, when I didn't give them what they wanted.

The mean looking officer, "We've had a rash of break-ins in our town? Someone broke into Mike's Garage and stole five thousand dollars. Would you happen to know anything about that?"

Those words, five thousand dollars, echoed through my mind. Wow brothers, the whole world is brimming with thieves. I knew I stole about two thousand, but the owner of Mike's Garage stole money from the insurance company. I replied, "I don't know anything about this?"

"Where were you on September 22, 2007?"

I laughed, "How would I know? Where were you on September 10, 2006?"

"A wise ass, huh."

"I don't have a photographic memory. I don't carry a calendar around with me, just in case the police arrest and

interrogate me and demand to know my whereabouts for every day for the last ten years.”

“You heard about the breaks-in, didn’t you?”

“Of course, I’ve heard of it. I do read the newspapers. I even wrote one story for the university newspaper.”

“Where were you on the night of the burglary?”

“Probably drinking with my roommate or watching a movie in the dorm or studying in the library.”

“Do you know anything about the burglary at the Library?”

“Library burglary? You mean someone stole some books from the library?”

The nice officer slapped me hard in the back of the head, “Just keep it up, wise ass.”

I can’t believe he struck me. *Fanny-blower. Calm yourself.*

The mean officer continued, “No, the Library Bar and Grill. What do you think we were talking about?”

“Of course not.”

“Where were you on October 22, 2007?”

“Probably the same as any other night at the dorm. I either study at the library or drink with my buddies.”

“Should we bring your roommate here and ask him?”

“Go ahead. I didn’t think I had to write my whole life down in a diary, so I can prove my whereabouts to the police state for every second of my life.”

The nice looking officer clenched and unclenched his fists several times. Oh, brothers, I knew this interview would become physical again.

The mean looking officer said, “Let me guess. You don’t know anything about the break-in at the house in Canyon Ridge?”

“Where’s Canyon Ridge.”

The nice officer slapped me in the back of the head again. Then he screamed, “On the other side of town. Next to your girlfriends’ house.”

“Girlfriend?” *Fucking dik-dik.* “I don’t have a girlfriend.”

The officers started laughing. The mean one continued, “That’s right. You’ve lost her. We talked to Dean Tremaine. He told us everything about you?”

“Sorry guys. I didn’t know the name of her neighborhood.”

“So you admit to breaking into Mr. Stryker’s house?”

“Sorry guys, it wasn’t me.”

The nice officer said, “You know, you can get ten years for breaking into a business. Ah, but breaking into a residence. That’s twenty years. Mandatory.”

“I don’t know anything about it.”

The mean officer pointed at the opaque window, “Mr. Stryker is standing behind that glass. He identified you as the suspect.”

“That’s great news for you. You’ve got your witness. I’ll see you in court, and the state can present him as the witness to the jury.”

The nice-looking officer reddened while his mouth trembled. He turned his back to me and clenched and unclenched his fist several times again. The slapping ended but his knuckles would take over for a little while.

The nice officer continued, “Then you would not happen to know anything about the armed robbery of the bursar’s office?”

“What? The bursar’s office?” Brothers, I sat there perplexed. I had no inkling that a team robbed the university during my protest. “That’s the first I heard of it.”

“That was clever to organize a protest, so your buddies could rob the bursar’s office.”

I just sat there and stared coldly at the officers, "I didn't rob the bursar's office."

The mean-looking cop said, "If you cooperate and give up your buddies' names, we can talk to the judge. The judge could reduce your sentence for cooperating with the authorities."

The nice-looking cop added, "You're looking a minimum of 20 years in prison for these crimes. But if you cooperate, you probably get twenty years, reduced to ten for good behavior"

Oh, brothers, sweat stung my eyes. I bent my head down and wiped my left eye on my left shoulder. Then I turned my head and rubbed my right eye on the other shoulder.

The mean-looking officer said, "I don't think he's hearing us."

The nice officer screamed, "Who are your accomplices in the bursar robbery?"

"I didn't rob the bursar's office."

"Where did your gang hide the money?"

"I don't have a gang. I didn't rob anyone. I especially didn't rob the university."

The mean officer said, "I think the kid's playing stupid."

Bam, as my head jerked to the side after the nice officer punched hard.

"That's a violation of my civil ri--"

Snap. My head jerked to the other side.

The mean officer said, "You have no rights. Where's the money?"

"I.. I didn't steal any money." *Oh corrupt cops. Jerkinhead.*

"I.. I demand to speak with my attorney." I screamed.

"Who's your lawyer?"

"Give me a phone book. I'll find one."

The officers laughed. Then the mean looking officer punched me in the mouth.

My teeth rattle and shook while my bottom lip split open.

“Who are your accomplices?”

“I don’t have any accomplices.”

“You organized that protest to create a diversion, so you and your friends could rob the university.”

“Diversion? Hell no. That protest was to fight against next year’s tuition hike.” Then I spat blood on the floor.

“What’s your HIV status?” the nice looking officer said.

“HIV status? Are you kidding me?”

“Do you have HIV?”

“How would I know? But I met so many nice girls in college. You never know.”

Bam. My head jerked to the left again.

I screamed, “If you guys stop hitting me, you wouldn’t need to worry about my HIV status.”

Oh, brothers, the first few slaps and punches hurt the most. Then a numbness and peaceful calm swept over me.

After an hour of physical interrogation with the officers, they dragged me to the cell and left me on the floor. I imagine I left a trail of blood and fluids on the floor that marked my path.

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I just lay there for several hours while I felt my face pulsated and throbbed with heat and pain. Brothers, I would rather meet Steve and his friends again. Their beating paled in comparison.

I have no idea how long I lay on the floor in this dark, windowless cell. After an eternity, I dragged myself to the sink and washed my face and hands.

Although the cold water stung when I washed my face, it helped sooth the throbbing a little. Then I collapsed in the center of the cell while lying on my back.

When I awakened again. I glanced over to the concrete bench and saw three tough looking thugs huddled together. I turned my head to the other side of the room and saw someone who looked like a college kid sitting in a corner.

I put my head down again, looked at the ceiling and closed my eyes.

"What'ya in for man?" a voice said from the group of thugs.

"I forgot to return a book to the library."

Everyone in the cell laughed.

The voice continued, "It looks like you got the shit beat out of you."

"You know. I bumped my head against the table several times in the interrogation room when the police were talking politely to me. I can be a little clumsy."

"You've must of done something really wrong. They don't waste their time on trifling matters."

I closed my eyes.

That voice asked again, "So, what did you do?"

"The police think I robbed the university."

"Oh damn. That's been in the news all day. Everyone is going batshit over that. Police have roadblocks everywhere, checking all the cars."

I raised my head and looked at the three huddled together on the bench. "Really?"

"They got away with over fifty thousand dollars. So where did you hide the money?"

I lowered my head again and closed my eyes, "I didn't do it."

"Yeah right."

"Sweet, man," the college kid said.

The leader of the pack said, “Nobody was talking to you.”

I rolled to my side and propped myself up into a sitting position. Then I scooted towards the wall between the thugs and college student.

The college student just stared at the three thugs while the three thugs stared back.

The leader thug continued, “I’m going to go over there and slap that smile off your face, boy.”

“Just try it,” the college boy said.

The three thugs hopped off the bench while the college kid slowly rose to his feet.

I interjected and defused the situation. “Guys, come on. We’re here together.”

Everyone’s head turned to look at me.

“It should be us against them. Not us against us. Our enemy has imprisoned us in this cell. Look at what they did to me. I refused to confess to crimes I didn’t do, so they beat the shit out of me.”

I pointed to my face for emphasis. “We should stand together. It’s us against them.”

Everyone in the cell sat down again. No one talked for a while.

I slid down the wall until I was lying on the concrete floor again and fell asleep.

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I woke up as an officer pounded on the metal door with his nightstick.

He shouted, “Rise and shine, dirt bag.”

I rubbed my eyes with my hands. Then I scanned the cell. It was empty again except the two officers standing by the opened cell door waiting for me.

"Let me guess? You arrested the culprits who robbed the university?"

"A visitor has come to see you."

"Who?"

All I could hear was the drip drip drip of the bathroom sink.

I slowly rose to my feet. I felt every muscle, every joint in my body ached.

The officers helped me and led me to a brightly lit room with two chairs on each side of the table, and low and behold, the room had a window that was letting in the morning sun.

As I walked in, Phaedra jumped out of her chair, ran to me, and hugged me. She leaned back while still holding my waist with her hands. "Jax, what happened to you?"

"Oh, nothing. I must have rolled off the bed in the cell and fell onto the concrete floor several times throughout the night."

"Jax. Be serious. The police said you had trouble with the inmates."

"Don't believe everything the police tell you."

"Jax, did they do this to you?"

"Does it matter?"

"Of course it matters. You know I still care for you."

"Thank you Phaedra, but don't worry about me. Everything will be over soon."

We sat down at the table and faced each other. Then I grabbed and held her hands. Brothers. She looked good even though she permanently damaged my heart. I wish she could take me out of this cell and nurse my wounds for the next twenty years.

"Jax, the police are saying you had friends rob the university bursar when you staged the protest. Is this true?"

Now, I understood why the police let Phaedra talk to me. I saw the opaque window on the wall and could visualize a team of cops standing on the other side, listening and recording everything that Phaedra and I said. The police hoped an old flame would make me squeal like a rusty old electric fan.

“Phaedra, believe me when I tell you this. I had nothing to do with the university robbery.”

“Then somebody broke into my dad’s office and stole his antique chess set.”

“I know. I heard about it.”

“Daddy thinks you did it?”

I looked straight into her eyes without blinking, “I didn’t do that one either. Your dad has many people angry with him. I think every student came to the protest except you.”

“I was there.”

“Really? I didn’t see you there.”

“By the tree, next to the ROTC Building.”

“That’s cool. I’m sure your dad’s furious about me foiling his tuition hike.”

“I don’t agree with him on everything.”

“Well, that is good to hear.”

I don’t know what possessed me, but I turned Phaedra’s hands over with the palms facing down. Then I saw the sparkle on the ring finger of her left hand. “Oh, it looks like you and Steve are progressing?”

“I’m sorry Jax. I didn’t know how to tell you.”

“Did you guys set a date yet?”

“Not yet. Steve wants to graduate first. Then we’ll set a date.”

I looked Phaedra in the eyes, “Do you love him?”

Phaedra looked down and shrugged her shoulders.

“I understand. You must think about your future.”

“I’m sorry Jax.”

"Don't apologize. I'm glad you came. We shared a moment. We're just two clouds drifting in different directions in the sky."

Phaedra continued looking down. "You're not angry?"

"Of course not. Let's go our separate ways. We shared some good memories, some good times. Let's not spoil them with bitter emotions. Perhaps, we'll meet again someday. We'll become friends."

We looked at each other.

Phaedra asked, "Do you really want to be friends?"

"Someday, I think we'll become best friends."

"I should go."

I still held Phaedra's hands, "Okay, but please don't worry about me. Like I said, everything will be solved. I'm sure the police will catch the town burglar and the university robbers. And your dad will find the bastard who broke into his office."

We both rose and embraced each other tightly. As I pulled back a little to look at her, I noticed a black emblem on Phaedra's gold necklace with a clover shape top. I looked closer and saw my black skeleton key dangling between her breasts. Then I let her go. Perhaps I should have said something. The girl broke my heart and then stole my lucky talisman. Damn. Steve really is a lucky guy.

She kissed me on the cheek. Then she looked at me, "Let's meet for coffee when you get out."

"That sounds like a plan. We can meet when exams are over."

Phaedra turned a little reddish, "I may not be in town after exams."

"Wow. Where are you and Steve going for Christmas?"

"Not with Steve. Daddy wants to take the whole family to Europe for Christmas."

"Europe. That's great."

“If you like, I can bring you back something.”

“Thanks for the offer, but, honestly, there’s nothing I need from Europe.”

We let each other go. She turned and walked out of the room. The two police officers escorted me back to my cell. I shook my head back and forth in disbelief. How could she have stolen my lucky talisman? That bitch.

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After I sat an eternity in the holding cell, the police opened a large metal door and lined the malfeasants in one line in a corridor. Then we walked along the hall with two police officers leading in the front while four officers trailing in the back. We marched along an underground tunnel from the police jail to the courthouse lockup.

Brothers, I was tired counting the same bricks over and over again in the same cell, so I was happy to sit in a new cell with a different shade of gray. Why are these cells always cold? Are the police storing us in a meat locker. I haven’t seen the sun in days or years in a windowless cell. I knew it was a matter of weeks before those walls would start playing tricks on me.

The police squeezed us into a little holding cell next to the courtroom.

We waited, waited, and waited. Occasionally, one of the inmates would sit down at a window and confer with their attorney. Then they would appear in front of the judge.

But I had no attorney, so I never sat down at the window to confer with anyone.

I just sat in the corner and kept to myself.

I asked the person next to me, “What’s the date?”

“Monday.”

“No, I mean the date on the calendar.”

The guy shrugged his shoulders.

Another inmate sitting across from me, "The fifth."

"Thanks."

Shit, I thought to myself. I have only been locked up a weekend, which felt like an eternity. I would go absolutely mad to sit in prison for a decade or two.

Around noon, or at least what I thought was noon, a police officer came and handed out brown paper bags for lunch.

I eagerly grabbed mine and sat down and tore the bag open - a bologna sandwich, a packet of crackers, an apple, and a box of juice.

One inmate tossed his bag onto the floor, "Not this shit again."

"What ya talking about? You should see the shit they feed us in the college cafeteria." Then I took a large bite of my sandwich and chewed it like I was savoring a USDA prime cut steak.

Everyone in the cell turned and stared at me.

"Are you serious?" someone called out.

"Yeah. Sometimes, I went to the homeless shelter where I could eat much better food."

"Unbelievable."

After lunch, inmates started disappearing one by one. Finally, I was the last inmate in the cell. I went to the pay phone and dialed zero.

The operator said, "What number do you want to call?"

"Crime Stoppers."

"Do you know the number?"

"I'm sorry, but I don't know the number."

"Just a moment please."

After several clicks and buzzes, the operator asked, "Do you accept a call from Marquette County Jail?"

"Yes, we accept the call."

“May we help you?”

“Yes. I would like to report a crime?”

“You are already in lockup. Just inform a detective.”

“I don’t think so. Besides, the police have not been very helpful so far.”

“What’s your name?”

“I thought I could report a crime anonymously?”

“It helps if you provide your name. That way the detectives can conduct a thorough investigation.”

“Look, I’m not providing my name. I may have information about that university heist last Friday, but if people don’t want to listen, I’ll just –”

“Okay. Okay. We’re listening.”

“You need to investigate David. He always hangs out at the Blackstone Church on Townsend Drive. His car plate 880 VKE.” Then I hung up.

After an hour, the bailiff opened the door and escorted me to the courtroom. I stood on the left side while the prosecutor stood on the right.

A court clerk said, “Your honor, this is the last case on the docket – a writ of habeas corpus.”

The judge asked me, “Are you, Jax Gamble?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Do you understand why you’re here today?”

“Yes, sir. I know habeas corpus allows an honest, hardworking lad like myself to challenge my unlawful incarceration.”

“Proceed with the case.”

The prosecutor started, “Your honor. Jax Gamble represents a threat to our society. He orchestrated a protest to hide a robbery of the university bursar’s office. We need to detain Jax Gamble for another week as the police complete their investigation.”

I pointed at my face, "Your honor, this is how the police conduct an investigation."

"Objection, objection."

The judge looked at me. Then he turned and asked the prosecutor, "Have you charged Jax Gamble with a crime?"

"No, sir. But Jax Gamble refuses to cooperate with the police investigation."

The judge examined me again.

I pointed to my face, "Your honor, the police are -"

"Objection, your honor," the prosecutor shouted.

The judge asked the prosecutor, "Do you have enough evidence to charge the defendant?"

"No, your honor. At this time, we're still collecting critical evidence."

The judge replied, "Then I uphold the writ and order the defendant released." Then the judge signed a document, stood up, and walked through the chambers door behind him.

The prosecutor faced me and squinted his eyes. "You think you won this round. But we'll get you." Then he stomped out of the court.

Brothers, I was happy when the police escorted me to my cell. I thought the police would immediately release me, but they didn't. They held me for another day and charged me for disturbing the public. Thank God, I called Drew and talked him into paying my fine. But damn, that fine was much better than the thirty years for burglary and armed robbery.

I didn't know it at this time brothers, but the police swooped in and arrested David. The police found the commemorative two-dollar bill, the stolen checks, and the Dean's antique chess set in the trunk of David's car. The police also found that fully loaded .38 Smith & Wesson, the one David gave to me to shoot the dean. The police linked

the gun to several murders in the area. I guess David thought I was a putz and would become the fall guy for his misdeeds. I guess I wasn't the obedient, mindless Christian soldier that David thought I was.

So brothers, I foiled my nemesis's assassination, the Dean, and the prick doesn't even know about it. But that's okay, though. Although I hate the bastard, I didn't think he deserved to die. Perhaps fired and left homeless on a street, but not dead. In the end, the Board of Trustees demoted the dean, so he returned to teaching as a regular professor, stripped of his dignity and authority.

I occasionally pass Professor Tremaine in the corridors, but I'm afraid to enroll into one of his courses. Of course, he lost that fancy office and moved to a pigeonhole under a stairwell. but at least he got his antique chess set back.

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## Chapter 20

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Brothers, the police just came to my jail cell early morning and released me. No apologies. No one wished me good luck with my future. No one said be good and don't come back. The pricks didn't even serve me breakfast. They just handed my stuff while I signed a form. Not one of them said goodbye as I left the facility.

By the grace of God, the police released me on the morning of my first batch of final exams. Brothers, at least I could finish my first semester at college. Perhaps I wouldn't earn the highest grades, definitely not high enough to hang out in Dean Tremaine's circle, or at least former circle since the board demoted him. Sometimes, I feel sorry for the pompous prick. At one moment, the board groomed him to take the position of the university president and who knows; perhaps he would become a future state leader. Now, he only teaches a class or two every semester, a has-been roaming the halls in the business building.

That Friday, after completing my final exams, I tied one on at a Delta party.

Drew asked, "Dude, I can't believe you were arrested."

I took a swig of the beer in my plastic cup, "What can I say? I was wrongfully arrested. Wrongfully accused."

"I'm surprised the university let you come back."

"What do you mean? They can't expel me. I was only charged with disturbing the public - just a slap on the wrist."

"Yeah dude, and you still owe me a hundred bucks."

I pulled out my wallet and counted out a hundred in old wrinkled tens and twenties. Then I handed it to Drew.

"Thanks dude."

"I always pay my debt."

Drew sipped his beer and asked, “Dude, everyone thought you were the master cat burglar. And I said, yup, he’s my roommate who terrorized this tiny town.”

I choked on my beer. Then I cleared my throat and said, “What? It’s wasn’t me. Good thing, the police arrested the real culprit.”

“Oh yeah, that crazy Christian dude from the church.”

“Yup, my Christian brother.”

“So you know this guy?”

“Of course, I know him. We went to the same church, and we worked together for the school newspaper.”

“The papers said the police linked him to several murders. That’s incredible. Do you think he killed those people?”

“I don’t know. He seemed like a good guy, but you never can tell about people from his looks, can you? People present one face to the world, and then they turn around and commit some real wicked shit.”

Drew gave me a strange look, “Yeah, you’re right. You can never tell about a person.”

We heard a commotion as a crowd gathered around the aluminum beer keg in the living room.

I pointed, “A keg stand. Do you wanna try?”

“Dude, that’s too crazy.”

“I’m going for it.”

I squeezed through the crowd as a frat boy screamed, “Who’s next.”

I stood next to the keg and screamed, “I am.”

Someone took my plastic cup. I grabbed both sides of the beer keg with my hands as two frat brothers grabbed and lifted my back feet until my body formed a slight angle.

Another guy pumped the keg to build up the pressure. Then he stuck the beer nozzle into my mouth and released a

river of beer that shot through my esophagus like an express train.

The crowd began cheering, "Go. Go Go Go..." while the beer gushed through my mouth and filled my stomach.

After several seconds, I started slapping the hand of the guy who held the beer nozzle. And the whole thing stopped. The frat brothers lowered me to the ground.

The crowd cheered as several guys patted me on the back one by one.

As I stood on my feet, the world wobbled a little.

Someone handed me a plastic cup filled with beer, and I joined Drew again.

"Dude, that was awesome."

"You're next." I said.

"I don't think so."

"You always said you're in college. These are the best times of your life."

"But. But I have my limits." Drew stammered.

"Well, suit yourself then."

"Do you think you'll join the Deltas?"

"I don't know." I said. "They are a bunch of cool guys, but I don't know. I hope they'll let me party with them some more before they cut off the free beer."

"Those membership dues are a killer."

"Tell me about. Just like our tuition bills."

After some serious drinking, Drew and I stumbled towards our dorm room. About half way home, Drew stopped walking and grabbed my hand to stop me.

I turned to look at him.

"Jax, no bullshit. Okay."

"What?"

"You were the town burglary, weren't you?"

"Oh, come on. I've already told you. It was my crazy Christian brother."

“Dude, serious. It was you. I know it was you.”

“What makes you say that?”

“I’m not a complete moron. Every time a break-in occurred, you were never around.”

I looked to the ground, “What difference does it make?”

“It makes a huge difference.”

I looked at Drew again, “Okay, let’s entertain your idea for a second. What if I were the town burglary? What difference could it make now?”

“I thought about what you said. We’re in college and at the peak of our lives. It doesn’t get any better than this. Then after graduation, it’s all downhill with our gravestone standing straight up at the base of the hill.”

“But that’s true for everyone. What’s your point?”

“I’ve done nothing crazy in my life except get drunk.”

“Tonight, I suggested you do a keg stand, but you backed out.”

“Phew. That’s not what I’m talking about. I’m talking about something real crazy. So when I’m sitting on a folding chair at an old folks’ home and chewing bubble gum with the old timers, I could tell a story or two.”

“You mean you want to do something serious, so you will have stories to brag about during your retirement?”

“It’s not just about the stories. Sometimes, I feel like my life is a giant bowl of plain vanilla ice cream. Nothing special.”

I shook my head back and forth, “I serious doubt you’re the only one with a dull life.”

“Well, what about you? What kind of stories do you have to tell?”

“I think I should be like you and wait to tell them when I sitting at a table at an old folks’ home. And, of course, the statute of limitations has run out.”

“See, that’s what I’m talking about.”

"Then what can I do?"

"Help me do something crazy?"

"Like what?"

"Like break into a building somewhere."

"No." I shook my head back and forth, "No way."

"I don't care about the money. Just a memento for memories."

"No. Absolutely not."

"Jax, you don't have to enter with me. Just tell me how to do it, so I don't get caught. Just wait for me around the corner."

"You really want me to teach you how to do it?"

"It can be something simple."

"I promised myself if I were released, I would never do this again. I'm retired. I'm training for a new position."

"Just this one time. That's all I ask."

"Why do you want to do this? You got a scholarship. Your tuition's paid for. I had nothing except several dead end job offers and an empty bank account."

"Then I'll pay you."

"No. I don't need your money."

We started walking towards the dorm again. Brothers, I looked at Drew, and he looked so pitiful. What could I do?

I stopped, "Okay."

Drew stopped and looked at me, "Okay what?"

"I do have the last job, but you can't tell anyone."

Drew grinned from ear to ear, "That's great. What's the job?"

"I'll tell you when we get there."

So, brothers, we walked and walked until we made it half way across the suspension bridge. I stopped to peer at the freezing dark waters passing below. I shivered a little. I haven't been on this side of town since the police chased me all over town that one unfortunate night.

Drew said, "The waters look cold."

"You should try swimming across it at midnight."

"What?"

"Never mind. Let's go."

We crossed the bridge and walked up the hillside park. We stopped at the park bench to sit down.

I started, "Here's the job. Dean Tremaine's –"

"What? Dean Tremaine's place?"

"Well, he's not Dean anymore. Besides, I thought you said you wanted to do this."

"Okay. Okay. I'm listening."

"I mean professor Tremaine's place is the bright yellow Victorian house with white trim. It'll be on your right when you walk down the street. It has a white porch swing in the front. You can't miss it."

"Okay. But what if he's home?"

"He's not home."

"How do you know?"

"He took the whole family to Europe."

"Alright."

"So put on your gloves."

"But I don't have any gloves."

I pulled my gloves off and passed them to Drew, "Then take mine. Climb the fence to the backyard and push out a small windowpane on the door. Don't worry. The house has no alarm."

"What do you want me to take?"

"Phaedra has a Beate's collector album. It's probably hanging on the wall in her bedroom. And it's expensive."

"How expensive?"

"A thousand bucks."

Drew whistled.

"Yeah, I know. I was stupid enough to have bought it for her."

"And you're complaining about the tuition bill."

"I didn't say I always exercised the best judgment. So you better go before I change my mind."

"Okay."

Drew turned to go, but I stopped him and added, "And look for a black skeleton key. It's probably in a dresser drawer or jewelry box in her room too. If you don't find it, then don't worry about it. She could've taken it to Europe with her."

"What's so special about the key?"

"It's my lucky talisman."

"It doesn't seem to be so lucky after all, since you lost your girl."

"Just go smartass."

Drew walked away.

I yelled, "Good luck."

Drew raised his right hand and pumped it up and down several times.

Brothers, I waited and waited for this guy for one long, long hour. Of course, I worried the police were patrolling the neighborhood and caught Drew breaking in, but I heard no sirens and saw seen no red and blue flashing lights.

Finally, I heard approaching footsteps. Then Drew appeared.

I asked, "What took you so long?"

"Dude, I had to search for it."

"Did you find the skeleton key?"

"Yup, I found it."

He put the picture frame down and handed me my black skeleton key.

"Oh, don't forget this." Then he handed me a pink woman's panties.

"What the fuck?"

"I brought you two gifts."

“I just wanted the skeleton key.”

“And now, you have something to remember your girl too.”

“I don’t think I need her panties.”

“Well, those are special. And by the way, I didn’t find those in the dresser drawer.”

“What?”

“Take a whiff.”

“Oh no. You didn’t. Oh man.” I said.

“Yup, I found them in the dirty laundry.”

Drew pulled out several slips of paper and said, “I found these too.”

I studied the paper, “Those look like straps someone uses to bundle money.”

“Do you see what’s stamped across them?”

I held them up to the moonlight and saw the University Bursar Office stamped in red ink diagonally across every strap.

“Oh shit.”

“You don’t think she robbed the university?”

“No way. It can’t be her.” I said.

“It looks like your ex is really naughty.”

“I don’t think it was her.”

“Then how did she get those?”

“I wonder where the hockey team was during my protest.”

“So you think the hockey team robbed the university?”

“I don’t know.” I grabbed Drew’s shoulder and looked him in the eyes, “Please, don’t tell anyone. Okay?”

“We should call the police.”

I pointed at the picture frame on the ground, “Then how will you explain to the police how we found the money straps?”

“Jax, that’s a really good point.”

"Let's go."

Drew picked up the picture frame, and we headed towards the bridge.

"So where did you find my key?"

"You won't believe me if I told you."

"Try me."

"I looked for that damn Beatles' album everywhere. No one tosses out a thousand-dollar collector's item. After I searched her room, I thought I would try the attic where I found the album leaning against a pile of boxes."

"What about the key?"

"That's even better. I saw an old workbench in the attic. As I walked by, I noticed an old jar filled with rusty nails and leftover screws and nuts. Your key was in there."

"Damn, I guess my girl didn't appreciate my gifts."

"Dude, you've been replaced. She found someone new, and she moved on. Then she put your stuff into storage."

"Where'd you find the money straps?"

"In her underwear drawer."

"It figures."

We started walking across the bridge. I said, "Anyway, the family will know someone broke into their house when they return. You make sure to take that Beatle's album home to your parents' house and leave it there."

"No way. I want to hang it in the dorm room."

"Drew, you must be smart. Phaedra's father will call the police when he sees the broken window. Phaedra may spot the missing album and skeleton key and suspect it was me who broke into her house. She knows that I know about her family vacation to Europe."

"Oh, come on. When someone stores something in the attic, it's almost as if that person is throwing it away."

"That's true. Then do this. Take the album home with you. If the police don't search our room, and we remain in

the clear, then bring the album with you when you return for the second semester.”

“Can do.”

We stopped at the halfway point on the bridge.

Drew asked, “What’re doing?”

“Saying goodbye to my girl.” I pulled out Phaedra’s pink panties and tossed them into the dark, raging waters below.

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Brothers, Drew returned to his hometown, and I had the whole dorm room to myself. Almost all the students went somewhere for Christmas, so this tiny town turned into a ghost town. Everywhere I walked, the dead echoes of my footsteps filled the empty corridors.

When the December skies dumped a foot of snow on the ground, I returned to the Math-Sciences Building to search for my little furry friends, but they were gone. I would stop by periodically and look for them.

Early Monday morning, the Financial Aid Office called me. They wanted to see me immediately. Entering the Financial Aid Office, I informed the secretary at the desk that I arrived. I turned to sit down and wait, but the secretary said, “Oh sir. Mr. Krause can speak with you now.”

“Wow. That’s service.”

As I entered Mr. Krause’s Office, he jumped up out of his chair, came around the desk, and shook my hand, “Glad you could make it on such a short notice.”

“No problem, sir.”

“Please have a seat.”

Mr. Krause closed his door and sat down behind his desk. He folded his hands together and placed them on the top of his desk and smiled.

Brothers, I looked around. Did I enter the correct office? Did I walked through a tear in the space-time continuum, and now I am stuck in a new universe where all my enemies are nice, friendly, and smiling?

I started, "So what do we need to talk about?"

"The university wants to offer you a full scholarship."

My eyes opened wide while my jaw almost hit the ground, "Wow. That's great."

He placed a document in front of me, "All we need is for you to sign this document."

I frowned. Then I squinted when I tried to read the microscopic print at the bottom of the document. "I can't even read this."

"Those are the conditions of your scholarship."

"Wow, it looks like the university is imposing thousands upon thousands of conditions on me. It'll take me a while to read this. Can you summarize some of the conditions?"

"For starters, you will abide by the student code. You will not participate in illegal behavior such as gambling or using illegal drugs. That sort of stuff."

"Oh, I get it. I will also not organize a protest against the said university without a proper permit."

"Sir, that is not in there."

"But I'm sure there is something about a protest in there."

"Did I mention you will receive this scholarship for four years?"

"Really? But I can't sign it."

"The university recognizes your achievements and will reward you."

"Can I ask? How many other B average students will receive this scholarship?"

Mr. Krause looked down.

“Please thank the university for their more than generous offer. Although I’m may be many things, but the one thing I’m not – I don’t sell out.”

Mr. Krause looked at me, “You are not a sellout.”

“Then what’s the condition about student protests.”

“You must have written consent from the university before staging a protest.”

“So, this scholarship is a way for the university to shut me up?”

“No sir.”

I rose from my chair, “Thank you for your time.”

“What will you do about next semester’s tuition?”

“Something I should have done months ago. I’ll get a job. Good day.”

Brothers, I almost didn’t walk out there without signing that form. Wow. A four year, full scholarship. But come on. Who pays hush money to shut up a broke, average student?

Then I smiled. The university must be really afraid of me. Besides, brothers, I should have done the right thing since the beginning. I will stay at the university for Christmas break and work all the hours I can. I don’t care if I have to shovel snow, flip burgers, or scrubbed the nasty stains off the toilet seats in the public restrooms. I’ll do what it takes to pay that tuition bill. I will even reduce my course load next semester and continue working part time. Then if I get a little free time, I’ll see my mom and make sure she’s doing well too.

Brothers, I’m going to try the honest living for a while and see where that takes me.

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## Epilogue

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Brothers, would you believe I completed college and became an investment advisor? But of course, life throws a curve ball at everyone from time to time including me. What are the chances that I would end up working for Phaedra's husband, Steve, and the guy is such a bastard that he would hire me to work for him? I say one-hundred percent. I went to work for Steve's investment firm located several blocks from the state capital complex.

I think Steve enjoys himself immensely. He orders me around and hands me the crappiest assignments. I've turned into his little puppy on a lease. Then Phaedra stops by the office daily to have lunch with Steve. Although my cubicle is on the far side of the office, she goes out of her way to pass by my desk on her way to Steve's corner office. Sometimes, we exchange greetings as she passes. Other times, I pretend to be busy at work and pretend not to see her. *Oh the pain of la douleur exquisite*. She always wears tight clothes and wiggles her butt from side to side like a ship bobbing up and down during the torrential swells during a hurricane. But brothers, I will admit, I do sneak a peek at Phaedra sometimes. Sometimes, I miss the warmth of her body when she would lie next to me, and whiff the sweet smell of her body.

Brothers, would you believe Phaedra even sent me an invitation to her wedding. Did she really believe I would show up? Oh, I almost did turn up and would enjoy seeing a surprised expression on her face, but I didn't. I guess she wanted to prove that Steve was taking good care of her. Rub it in my face like a shit pie.

Of course, brothers, I almost quit after the first week working for Steve. I had no idea how shameless, these shenanigans were. Steve and his corrupt bosses committed fraud and theft on a wide scale. Those thousands I stole from breaking into homes during my first semester of college

became pennies after witnessing the large-scale stealing going around me.

I will admit, Steve invented many ways to steal money. At our company, we buy stock at rock bottom prices from disreputable companies that nobody wanted. We plow our customers' money into those stocks and launch the stock prices into the stratosphere. Then the company sells the customers our cache of stocks for high prices while the company profits immensely. Don't worry, our clients earn a return too, but they didn't earn anything what the company earns. That way everyone comes out head, and nobody reports anything to the government.

Sometimes, we know which parent companies will take over another company, so my bosses secretly buy stock using bank accounts from the Cayman Islands. When the parent company announces the takeover, my bosses cash in on the soaring stock price.

Some scams only a handful at the company know about it or how it was designed. I heard the company maintains shell companies around the world. The companies buy our bad debts and borrow from foreign banks. Then our company lets the firms bankrupt while my bosses steal everything they can from these companies.

Of course, at the end of the month, my corrupt bosses pay themselves a bonus by skimming money off everyone's account and transferring it to their accounts overseas. One person's job is to search the daily obituaries and search for our deceased clients. Then their accounts are mysteriously closed while the funds disappeared to overseas bank accounts.

Brothers, enough is enough.

Although I just sell stock and excused myself from this illicit behavior, I accidentally found a back door into their

computer systems. Seriously Steve, why would you use Phaedra's name and birth year as a master password?

I documented the systematic corruption and explained every instance of fraud with immense detail. Then I made three copies and filled three boxes. I went beyond giving the government a treasure map where x marks the spot. I literally stuck a shovel in the ground above the treasure and told the government agents where to start digging. I mailed one box to the Securities and Exchange Commission, another to the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and finally, the third to the Internal Revenue Service.

So, brothers, I still come to work early every day, just waiting and waiting and waiting. One day, those government agents will smash through the front doors, and I'll see the firm's downfall and the look on Steve's face.

Finally, that day came. A swarm of agents wearing blue jackets with SEC printed on the back in large white letters burst through the front doors one morning. The number of SEC agents outnumber the number of firm's employees.

One agent entered my cubicle and snapped. "Back away from your computer. Don't touch anything."

I rose from my chair and stood in the far corner as the agent disconnected the computer. Then he rifled through my desk drawers and stacked all the documents onto the computer and walked away.

After half an hour, the SEC gutted our whole office. All computers and servers were gone. All filing cabinets and desks were empty.

I stood up and peered over the cubicle wall and saw Steve in his office screaming at several agents.

Steve turned completely red and clenched his teeth as he left his office. As he passed by, he stared at each one of us one at a time. Then he screamed, "Get back to work," and he stomped out of the office.

But brothers, we had no work. A large mass of people gathered around the coffee machine in the break area. I grabbed my coffee mug and joined them. Unfortunately, I couldn't penetrate the dense crowd to get another cup of coffee.

Mike, a new co-worker, brushed my arm with his hand. I turned to look at him.

"What are we going to do?" he asked.

I shrugged my shoulders, "What can we do?"

"I mean what'll happen to our jobs."

"Well, I think the SEC will shut us down, so we won't have a job by the end of the week."

"But I need this job."

"I need this job too, but this raid was serious. I think the firm will shut down, so we'll just have to find new jobs."

Another person tapped me on the shoulder.

I turned to look and was surprised to see Phaedra, "Hi Phaedra."

"Hi, Jax. What's going on?"

"You didn't talk to Steve?"

"I couldn't find him."

"You should ask him."

Phaedra placed her hand on top of mine, "Please Jax. What's going on?"

"I'm sorry to tell you, but the SEC raided the office. They took everything."

"That's bad. Isn't it?"

I just stared at her.

Phaedra looked at her watch and then gazed at me, "Jax, do you have time for a coffee?"

"I think I have some time. Let's go."

We didn't say anything as we walked outside and walked to a little coffee shop around the corner.

We ordered some coffees and sat outside to enjoy the spring sun.

Phaedra asked, "Jax, please be honest with me. Do you think Steve will go to prison?"

"Phaedra, I don't know. I don't know the extent of his crimes." But of course I knew the extent of Steve's crimes. Damn, I sent three large boxed stuffed with incriminating evidence to three government agencies.

"But you think it's serious?"

"Yeah, it's real serious. The government agents stripped the whole office of documents and computers. So someone will serve time in prison."

Phaedra looked down at the table.

"Did Steve ever tell you some of the stuff that he did at the company?"

Phaedra shook her head back and forth while tears gushed from her eyes.

"Didn't you ever ask where the money came from?"

She shook her head no again.

Then she looked at me, "What will I do?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean what will you do?"

"That's easy." I took a sip of my coffee, "I'll find another job somewhere else."

"Aren't you afraid to be sent to prison?"

"No. A person has to do something wrong to do time."

"Where will you work?"

"I had offers. I'm thinking about giving back to the community and work for a nonprofit. I think I want to help people and help counsel the poor."

"But you won't make any money."

"I don't care about the money anymore. Money corrupts the hearts of men. You wouldn't believe just by working at

the firm, tamed puppies are transformed ravenous, selfish wolves within months.”

“Is it really that bad?”

“Yes.”

“How did you stay pure?”

“That’s the secret of money. If you don’t want it, it can’t corrupt you.”

She reached across the table and held my hands, “I wish I could be strong like you.”

“I’m not strong. After my first semester in college, I decided to do the right thing. And you know what? I’d never regretted it. I went along the straight path and never looked back.”

“I’ve always done the right thing too. I’ll finish law school next year.”

“That’s great. So you haven’t gotten into trouble?”

Phaedra shook her head no.

Brothers, would you believe, I always carried one money strap with the Bursar’s Office stamped in red ink in my wallet. I dreamed of the day that I would confront Phaedra about it, and it looks like the day had finally come. I pulled the money strap out of my wallet and placed it in the middle of the table.

Phaedra looked at it, “What’s that?”

“You don’t know.”

After a minute, Phaedra jerked back as her eyes opened wide.

I said, “I guess you remember now.”

“It was a long time ago. How long have you known about it?”

“Since the beginning.”

“You’re not going to hold it against me, will you?”

“No, of course, not. If I had a problem with it, I could’ve turned over the evidence to the police.”

"I guess you're right."

"So, did you really attend my protest?"

"Jax, of course, I was there."

"Huh, but Steve and his buddies were a little busy during that time?"

Phaedra shrugged her shoulders.

"That's what I thought."

We sat for a while and sipped our coffees. Brothers, I've gotta admit, it almost felt like old times again, when Phaedra was my girl. *Oh la, the retrouvailles*. I felt alive brimming with energy when she was near me. If someone touched me now, I would give them one hell of an electric shock, worse than an electric chair.

Phaedra smiled and broke the silence, "Are you doing anything this weekend?"

"What do you mean?"

"I thought we could go out for dinner and just hang out, like old times."

"Dinner? What about Steve?"

"I think Steve will be too busy to join this weekend."

"I guess you're right. He'll probably be busy for the next ten years."

Phaedra frowned a little. Then she pulled out a pen and wrote her number on a napkin. She placed her coffee cup on the napkin's edge, so a breeze wouldn't blow it away.

She rose, leaned over, and kissed me on the cheek, "I must go Jax. Please call me, okay?"

I caressed her hand for a second, "Okay."

She walked away.

I looked at my watch. I should return to work, but I didn't think my boss would scream at me for returning late. Besides, my boss has more pressing legal issues at the moment, so he probably wouldn't mind if I slept in tomorrow too.

I glanced over at the next table and spotted a discarded graphic novel with a familiar name, Drew. I retrieved the novel, leaned back in my chair, and leafed through it.

I started chuckling when I noticed one of the evil characters – Jacks, who was a master cat burglar and thief. The villain even used a magical key that would allow him to break into any building or safe. Drew even captured my facial expressions accurately in his fictional character. At least he finally made it and become a successful artist. Perhaps, I should write him and ask for autographed copies.

I pulled out my black skeleton key and stared at it for a minute. Of course, I only use this key for good intentions now. Then I stared at Phaedra's number as it flapped in the breeze.

I rose from the table and walked away. *Lost the cavoli riscaldati!*

The End