

Kenneth R. Szulczyk

Paying for College



The Novel

All characters, places, and situations that appear in this work are purely fictitious, created in the writer's mind. Although the places in the novel do exist, any resemblance to real people – living or dead – are entirely coincidental.

Paying for College – The Novel
Copyright © 2016 by Kenneth R. Szulczyk
All rights reserved

Cover design by Kenneth R. Szulczyk

Published 2016 by KDP ISBN: 9781535413251
Published 2016 by Smashwords ISBN: 9781370063048

Edition 3.0, May 2024

Table of Contents

Table of Contents	3
Chapter 1 – How Did I Get Here?	5
Chapter 2 – The Craziest Begins	15
Chapter 3 – Searching for Redemption.....	31
Chapter 4 – She’s Mine	43
Chapter 5 – The Dean Screwed Me	53
Chapter 6 – This Was the Perfect Life	67
Chapter 7 – The Damn Financial Aid Office, Again	81
Chapter 8 – Not Again?.....	86
Chapter 9 – I am Losing Her	101
Chapter 10 – It Gets Even Crazier	113
Chapter 11 – Returned Home One Last Time	121
Chapter 12 – An Expensive Gift.....	133
Chapter 13 – The Dean’s Dinner Party	142
Chapter 14 – The Attack of the Atomic Burritos.....	149
Chapter 15 – A Good Day for an Ass Whipping.....	155
Chapter 16 – Some Idle Threats and Tasty Cornbread	159
Chapter 17 – Almost Apprehended.....	171
Chapter 18 – It Was a Good Day for a Riot	181
Chapter 19 – Prison, Here I Come	187
Chapter 20 – An Honest Living for a Change	200
Epilogue.....	211
About the Author	218
The Arduous Path to Enlightenment.....	218
My Journey into the World of Intermittent Fasting	219
The Rise of the Insane State – What is Happening.....	220

Paying for College – The Novel

To Tame Man.....221
Searching for Stolen Love222
The Second American Revolution – The Building of an
Empire.....223

Chapter 1 – How Did I Get Here?

Oh, brothers! How did I turn into a thief? I would prowler 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 was not even sure how I became a burglar. One day, I did a quick job to pay for 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 dreamt of cracking safes. I would jump up and down like a football player who scored another touchdown for the team to win as the safe opened slowly and revealed its contents.

Oh, brothers, how did my life choices lead to this dead-end, this unsavory life? Could one 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 was one of the lowest life forms, like the slime and germs that grew around a toilet bowl.

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

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

I sat, 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. Still, I sat quietly as they towered over me with large, muscular bodies. 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 questions. Bastard! I felt

a trickle of blood drip, drip, dripping from the corner of my lips as I winced from the strong, bitter copper taste in my throat. Still, I just sat there as if this illegal treatment of the suspect didn't bother me. I refused to show these donut chasers any weakness.

The policeman screamed, "You'll talk! We know you did it. Confess now." Then he slapped me on the back of the head, causing my head to jerk forward.

With his military crewcut and massive, chiseled muscles, the cop 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!" The policeman 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 wasn't innocent. I was 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 would 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 soared into 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 dark cell. Approaching the cell, they both flung me hard towards the cell door, bruising my face as it crashed against the heavy metal. A sharp pain went up my face from 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 lay on the floor for a while. Perhaps thirty minutes. Perhaps thirty years. The blood gushed from my nose, slowed to a trickle, and eventually stopped.

After an eternity, I scooted toward the metallic sink, grabbed the sink basin with my weak hands, and worked myself up to a standing position. I turned on the faucet with one hand while bracing the sink with the other hand so I couldn't fall; I 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 face down. The coldness from the concrete helped soothe the throbbing pain in my nose, cheeks, and other injured parts. I didn'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 perhaps date a naughty college girl or two. Then I could run to the abysmal job market and score that perfect job, where the doors of opportunity would open to a new life, a life without a mailbox full of late payment notices. I could turn around and slam the door of poverty that had followed me around since I was born. No matter how hard I studied, no matter how hard I worked, I couldn't get ahead. I was stuck in a gerbil cage running on the wheel that went nowhere. 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. My mom dropped me off at the bus station early in the morning. I rode a crowded bus for six hours, and it strode through the countryside and small towns of Michigan. As the bus 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 as I passed from one building to the next.

The campus faded from view as the bus drove through several blocks of spacious, two-story mansions with bright Greek letters identifying the fraternities and sororities. Finally, the bus approached the downtown of this small, quaint college town where nothing of significance happened unless the hapless hockey team

accidentally made the NCAA playoffs. No murders, no robberies, no serious felonies had marred this tiny town. Most people didn't bother to lock their homes or carry their house keys, or at least until I had arrived. Then things would change.

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 merged into the slowly moving line as the occupants exited the bus. Once outside, I slung my backpack over my shoulder, pulled out the suitcase's handle, 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 shall figure out which fraternity threw the best parties and which sorority had the sluttiest women as I would wake up the following day 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 blared Crazy Train. At the same time, 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 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.

My roommate burst from the bathroom, "What're you doing?"

"I'm grabbing a bed."

"But that's my bed."

"I don't think so," I said as 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 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 belongs to me. So, I am taking this bed.”

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 and nodded my head. “I clearly marked my territory. By the way, my name is Jax.”

My roommate grinned and glared at me. “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, which showed 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 seemed 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, dude. Cut me some slack. I didn’t know.”

“Just leave my stuff alone.”

“No problem. Then you must grant me the same favor too.”

Drew just shrugged his shoulders.

“If you have a problem with me, we can take it outside. I’m not going to put up with your crap.”

Drew looked downward and ran to the bathroom.

I tried to avoid a fight on my first day in college, but I knew some men were Chihuahuas. They barked more than they bit. I knew. I won the challenge this time. Hopefully, like a good puppy, I slapped that nose hard with a newspaper, and he would come around and start acting right. Men have to define clear boundaries.

Next, I explored the campus like a curious kitten, exploring a new home. I walked by every building, sidewalk, 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, this time as he hunched over at the white laminated desk and sketched another graphic scene. “How’s it going?” I asked.

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

“You don’t talk much, do you, Captain America.”

“Not much to say,” he said as he looked up at me.

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

I continued, “I hear ya. So, are 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, not liking my attire, and said. “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 is strict, and he wants everything formal.”

“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 striped 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. I stuck out like a hairy grizzly bear at a weekend Bible revival. 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 sitting behind a table with her long blond hair as she handed students their nametags. She placed her cell phone on the table while the Beatles sang, *Hey, Jude*.

Drew nudged me and asked, “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. I could tear off her clothes and toss her onto that table and ravage her body, but I

was no savage. The ability of man to suppress and delay his primal urges is what separates man from the beasts.

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

She looked up 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."

Her naughty fingers glided over the name badges until they stopped at my badge. "Here you go," she said as she picked up the badge 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 glance so she would not notice. I said, "You have me at a disadvantage. You know my name, but I didn't catch yours."

She smiled and stared at me while her eyes twinkled a little naughtiness.

"Well, then. I'll just call you the mysterious nametag girl."

"Maybe I didn't give 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, helping people invest their money and plan for their financial future."

"Ambitious, aren't you?"

“Perhaps a bit, but I’m the guy who does not waste any opportunities. I make a plan and then follow through with it. I plan to turn on that money machine and have money rolling into my account on a regular basis.”

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 I thought who 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?” She asked with a grin.

I studied Phaedra’s father, and then I turned to look at Phaedra again. No way did Phaedra come from his loins. I would need a DNA test that a thousand scientists would need to authenticate. 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.

“Of course,” I replied. “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, looked behind me, and saw a squad of surfer nerds with reddish angry faces. They looked so out of place wearing dress shirts, dress pants, and ties. 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 didn’t throw any challenges in one’s way?”

Drew and I 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. I stood there and drank that Kool-Aid as if I was drinking the swankiest wine. I felt a rush of excitement and lust swept 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 bit too sweet,” Drew said.

“The Kool-Aid is alright,” I lied. Still, nobody likes a complainer and I added, “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,” he said as he watched me approach the Dean.

As I approached the Dean and stretched my right hand out for a handshake, I said, “Good afternoon, sir.” The Dean stared at my hand as if my hand were covered in dirt and grime.

Brothers, what could I do? I had done nothing to bring this rudeness upon myself. “That’s okay,” I said. “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 anyway.”

The Dean scanned the faces around him and stared coldly at me. “Good day, gentlemen,” the Dean said 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.

“Nice one,” Drew said as I approached.

“So much for a first great impression.”

Drew and I headed to the first row of folding chairs in front of the outdoor stage. I sat in the center because I knew these educated types couldn't get enough of themselves and 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 from their ears.

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

Drew moved several seats down to distance himself from me. I stood up and stretched my hands one last time, yawning so loudly that 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 lacked 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 would doom a budding relationship. Still, serendipity always sent 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 hadn't 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. Unfortunately, I was caught in a spider's web, and the spider was hungry.

Chapter 2 – The Craziess Begins

Damn, brothers, I wasn't even at the university for a whole week, and I held 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 – no partial payments.

I headed to my favorite university office – the financial aid office. God, those bureaucrats were so kind and helpful, and they provided the best customer service in the state. Just kidding. That was definitely not the right 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 at the office five minutes early, sat in a hard plastic chair, and waited for twenty years. If the financial aid officer took any longer, I would have to notify the Social Security Office to mail my retirement checks to this office. Of course, we were destined to meet. The dragon lady was the only one of the staff members who became available. “Hello. How are you?” I said in my chirpiest voice as I walked into her office. Then I placed the letter on her desk so she could easily read it.

The dragon lady stared at it, then swiveled in her chair to read the computer screen. “Student number?” she asked.

“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? Money in a trust fund that you do not know about?

I studied her degrees hanging on the wall—an associate's in hotel hospitality and a bachelor's in liberal arts.

The dragon lady 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.”

“Oh,” I paused. I looked down and replied, “My parents don’t have that kind of money now.”

“Then ask your friends.”

“My friends are broke, just like me.”

“Then you have a problem.”

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

“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 like I had swallowed a large boulder down my throat. I thought she would bite me because of the way her hair was pulled back so tightly; it pulled her cheeks back to reveal her fangs. I said, “I was afraid you would say something like that. Thank you for your time.” I muttered fudge stick under my breath as I rose. As I approached the door, I 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 because I have plastic house plants with a more charming personality than her.

I walked to the dorm as a drizzle fell. Boy, I really picked a kind and understanding university. I was short on the bill, and they would graciously give me some time off. That way, I can work and ensure I have plenty of money for the next semester. What was wrong with America when \$660 stopped the education of a bright young lad. Just \$660! A meager sum. I didn’t ask for much, but that twenty thousand per year in tuition cost a fortune. At those prices, I should demand the university provide me with a maître d’ to carry my books to class, and a waiter to bring my food tray to my table in the cafeteria.

Walking to the dorm, I knew where the university didn'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. Although the economy had plenty of jobs, they didn't pay benefits, gave no respect, and offered 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, and the RA babysits us.”

“RA? What's an RA?”

“Resident advisor. He follows us around, ensuring we're not drinking, damaging university 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,” mom sighed and paused. Then she added, “Dad's in his room sleeping. Let's not 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 her voice crackle as she mopped the tears on 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 would like to see where all that money is going. Are you doing all right with your financial aid? We know college is expensive.”

“Oh, come on Mom. We live in the great state of Michigan. Our state does not hesitate to invest in its young people. Like I said, 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 you can always come home if you get into trouble. 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 wasn’t 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. Maybe 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 threatening collection letters. 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 wouldn’t have to see those bastards again. Of course, I could mail those bastards a postcard from Mexico during Christmas break as I soaked up the sun and sipped pina colodas while those bastards would freeze in their offices during a Michigan winter.

Of course, I wanted to talk to my dad, but he stopped talking to everybody long ago. He stayed in the spare bedroom all day, locked inside as the blare of the TV muffled through the thin walls of his room.

Every week, mom bought 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 headed 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 when 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, sat at his desk sketching a new drawing, and he looked up at me. "Hey man, where are 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 a gothic castle with a stormy background to life. "That's really good," I said.

"Thanks."

I went to the bathroom and changed. Then I slipped out of the dorm. 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 studied the trees 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 the corner of the building.

So here I sat, crouching behind a large bush. It was only September, but damn, it was freezing. Although I sat under the overhang 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 was 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 was I doing here? Was I this desperate? This was pure craziness. I had committed no severe crime yet, so I could return 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 a French fry technician. Only some people in town can make an awesome burger and put the right crispiness on the French fries. You would never know. I could be a crew manager in five years and a restaurant manager in ten. But then the embarrassment, the humiliation as high school classmates headed 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. What a loser!"

I could hear their hurtful questions, their humiliating scorn, "What happened to you, man? I thought you would head to college and make something of your life."

Rage and anger kept me glued to this spot. "I hate being a loser," I mumbled. "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 possessed this key, I could enter any place with luck on my side. I traced the key's outline, following the clover end and 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 a little rascal with no care for 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 the second staircase to the second level, and sped past the slower kids to the top. Then I hopped on the slide and slid 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 the playground and hopped on a swing. I swung back and forth as far as I could, trying 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, I jumped and kicked up a cloud of wood chips. I smiled as I looked down at the two cavities I had created with my feet as I sank at least six inches into the ground. As I hopped out of the holes, I marveled at my masterpiece. Then I spotted an ancient cast iron skeleton key resting at the bottom of one of the cavities. 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 give it back. Now."

"Finder keepers, losers –"

Timmy pushed me. I wrapped my fingers around the key and pushed Timmy back.

Timmy punched me on the cheek. "Oh yeah. I'll show you."

I punched, 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, jumped on my feet, and stood up.

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 as I brushed off the dust. Timmy and his mother walked away. When Timmy was ten feet away, he turned. “See ya in school.” He winked, used his fist to punch his open hand, and added, “We’ll finish this lesson, later.”

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

“What’s that about, Jax?” My mom asked.

I turned and showed her the anachronistic skeleton key.

My mom grabbed the key by the clover end, held it to eye level, and studied it. “Where’d you get this?”

“I found it.” Then I pointed to the cavity that I had made with my feet.

“This must be a magical key. It’ll open any door,” my mom said and placed the key in my hand, and I deposited it into my pocket...

I emerged from my daydream as a mechanic dropped a wrench – CLANNK! 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 horrible can happen. 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 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 passing 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 building. 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, where 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 had seen many complaints, where many 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 their estimates.

I knew my friend hated his job and his boss. He said that whenever he turned around, he argued with his boss for an unpaid commission or wasn't paid for forgotten work. Then one day, my friend brought a new customer to the shop. This customer started a car rental business and requested that ten sunroofs be 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 exit, 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, turned, and parked the car 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 when I 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 a spotless 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 goodbye to someone inside and said, “See ya later, Chad.” Then he climbed into the Buick. The Buick’s engine roared to life. As the mechanic stomped on the gas pedal several times, the V8 engine roared and spewed out smoke from the exhaust. The mechanic put the car into gear and drove away.

I stood in the bushes, waiting, and waiting, and waiting. Although I couldn’t see Chad, I knew this was good news. From my internet research, I knew 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, he was suffering down there as he missed the minus ten-degree Michigan winters and the freezing mornings to shovel the blanket of new snow covering the sidewalks and driveways. Let’s not forget to chisel the ice from the car windows.

The lights clicked off, and the garage became 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 they slammed into the ground like a thunderclap.

Chad padlocked each garage door. Then he walked to his truck, a Ford F-150, parked next to his office. I noticed he was a tall, muscular man with rugged good looks. Of course, I didn’t see any complaints about all the hearts he probably had broken in town or all the money he stole from his customers.

I stood behind the bushes for an extra 30 minutes and didn’t see any cars. The front of Mike’s Garage remained quiet except for the crickets singing their cacophonous, mating songs as the rain trickled into a sprinkle.

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 because they forgot to turn off the coffee maker.

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 to shake off the sleepiness.

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, and 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 these massive oak trees that grew behind the building. I also slid my hands into my jacket pocket to warm them.

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

"You okay?" his friend asked as he 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 downtown. They must be walking to Mad Murphy's, a popular Irish pub 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 quieted 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 considered myself a friendly person, I wasn't in the mood to make new friends tonight. "Shit," I mumbled and frowned 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 frozen 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 tried 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, released the window's latch, and pushed the window up.

I turned to scan the area again. Seeing no cars, people, or semblance of 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, and I entered the office without 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 of 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 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 other forbidden books under the drawer.

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

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 lockbox 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 started working 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 hadn't seen so much money as 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 could I cash those.

I stacked all the bills and tucked them into my front jeans' pockets. Then, I held my open 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 jeans' pockets. Several coins fell to the floor with a ting, but I just left them there—too much of a bother.

I thought I had found the main cash box, but who knew what other goodies remained in the garage? I went to every drawer in the garage, emptied the drawer's contents on the floor, and checked 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, too.

I returned to the office and searched through all the filing cabinets. Then I found an old coffee can with a slot cut in the plastic top stuffed with small crumpled bills and coins. I emptied the can's contents 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 became dark again.

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

Two people sat in the front seat with the engine switched off. The 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 to the car and knock on the driver’s window. “Get a room,” I would scream as I handed him fifty bucks.

After fifteen minutes, the driver started the Honda Civic and drove away. I waited another five minutes before 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 had walked two blocks away, I felt this high, this euphoria that energized my mind and body. I had enough energy to run faster than any Olympic sprinter.

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 the poor dog would become confused and lose my scent with all the sweat, odors, and skanks pouring out of the bar. Plus, I needed a beer. No way would I sleep with all that adrenaline racing through my veins.

Approaching the bar, I heard a country-western song blaring about how his girl had left him for another guy. Walking into the bar, I spotted an empty bar stool at the far end. I plopped onto the wooden stool.

A cute little thing wearing tight jeans, cowboy boots, and a baseball cap put on backward approached me. “What’d have, hon?”

“A Budweiser, on tap, please.”

As the bartender turned, I read the back of her black T-shirt: 15th Annual Karate Tournament. Well, I guess I won’t be hitting on her tonight. She may add several roundhouse kicks to the head as she says no.

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

“Five-fifty,” the bartender said.

“Oh yeah. Just a second,” I answered as I pulled out a handful of coins, dumped them onto the counter, and started counting 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.

I looked at the mirror that spanned the whole back wall behind the bar. It had glass shelves with rows of 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. The 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, racked the balls in the triangle, and stood back. The mechanic hit the cue ball so hard that it crashed against the other balls, and the balls started moving and bouncing off the bumpers of the pool table. Finally, three balls dropped into holes.

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

He nodded his head slightly and grunted.

I hunched over and hit the cue ball with the stick. The ball I aimed for veered off course and didn’t come close to the corner hole.

I gulped my beer while the mechanic made another two balls.

On 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 slightly. The cue ball moved slowly and kissed the eight ball just a touch, 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?” He asked.

“Oh, I don’t think so. I don’t need you taking all my hard-earned money.”

“Alright then. Next!” The mechanic screamed.

I approached the bar to get another beer, and I finished my beer. Of course, I thought the bartender was warming up to me. Perhaps she borrowed that karate t-shirt from a friend. After several more frowns, perhaps she would give up that phone number.

Chapter 3 – Searching for Redemption

Brothers, I woke at seven-thirty in the morning with a stomachache that felt so terrible that I thought 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 was that? My first serious felony. My other transgressions paled in comparison, like the time I stole my cousin's remote-controlled car or snuck a twenty out of my mom's purse so I could meet my friends at the mall. Feeding the arcade games quarters in the summer was my full-time job.

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 couldn't return home and take that dead-end job in a dead-end town with a dead-end future. I will be somebody—somebody with a college degree—somebody with a future.

I left the bathroom, tiptoed to the room, grabbed my jeans lying on the floor, and returned to the bathroom, locking 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, earning that kind of money would have taken two hundred hours of back-breaking work at the fast-food restaurant. Then,, somewhere in my mind, my subconscious screamed, Jax, you're wrong. Return this money. This money doesn't 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 *zzzzZZZZZ* came from his mouth while his chest rose and fell.

I pulled out my dirtiest underwear from my laundry bag, wrapped it around a thousand dollars, and pushed it to the bottom of the 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 knew what this guy would do when I wasn't around. I didn'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 some of everything and sat at an empty dining hall table.

I was tired of the same food selection and experimented and gradually mixed up my routine. 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 together. I knew the ketchup and mayonnaise would glue everything together. Plus, the food tasted better and was palatable when a layer of ketchup was added. That was the secret of eating cafeteria food; a little ketchup makes everything taste a little better.

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

I heard the bedsprings rattle as my sleeping roommate turned his head toward 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 the back surrounded by a wooden fence. I first looked left and then right. No one was around. I lifted the dumpster lid, tossed my old clothes into the trash, and walked away. Last night's evidence was safely discarded into a dumpster.

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 as 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 didn'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 were the odds that was the same Dean with whom we shared a budding relationship?

I rose and ran to the bathroom, where I 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 of the back exit 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 and sorority houses. No souls roamed around early in the morning. 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 between two fraternity houses, which I hadn't noticed before.

I ran to the church and rushed inside. I found an empty spot in the back pew. 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 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 jeans 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. That illicit money was out of my pocket and going

towards something good or better. I recycled something evil and foul into something good.

The pastor read a sermon about doing good deeds in a wicked world. Then we sang our last song and kneeled 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 them, and they returned a blessing.

A neatly dressed man walked towards me in the whitest dress shirt I had ever seen and polished black shoes that sparkled under the incandescent lights. His boots even matched his black slacks. “Hello, I’m David,” he said.

“Hello. I’m Jax,” I said as 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 church’s exits, and I got in line to follow. Walking by the bulletin board, I saw several notices, and one caught my eye—volunteers are needed at the Homeless Shelter. I stopped to read it.

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

“Perhaps I can volunteer some of my time.”

“The church appreciates any help.”

After walking outside of the church, many church members retrieved covered pots and Tupperware containers from their cars and placed them on the wooden picnic table outside in the back under the shade of large pine trees.

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

“Jax, since you’re a visitor, you get to go first,” David said.

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, cookies, and steamed rice.

I sat down in a lawn chair towards the back. I honestly was in heaven and wolfed my food down. Home cooking always trumps cafeteria food. David and his two cronies sat next to me. I was sure

they would ask the same questions they always ask new visitors to the church.

“How’s the food?” David asked.

“Delicious,” I said 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 didn’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 occasionally.”

“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.”

I stopped eating and just stared at David. “No way. I would need proof,” I said, but I hoped David had some good stuff on the Dean.

“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 into using 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 sell, so the city seized their land and evicted the homeowners.”

“Yeah, but the Dean and city government did it for the greater good. A big stadium can bring many fans to this small town and help contribute to the economy.”

“But one of the homeowners was a long-time member of this church.”

“Ok. 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 said as he 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.”

I almost choked. “What?” I asked.

David continued, “Oh yeah. The university underestimated the cost of the new stadium. I heard a rumor that the university will raise tuition fifteen percent next year and impose a bunch of new fees.”

“What?”

“Fifteen percent.”

My heart missed a beat as if it 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 the community’s economic development? 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.”

“Then how?”

“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, sacrificing animals, and chanting obscured Latin texts to the heavens.”

“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 trying to close our church.”

“Seriously?”

“Yes. The Dean convinced the city council to condemn our property and take it over. We’re trying to challenge that.”

“What’s the point? What does he gain if he closes the church?”

“Our church protested against him several times. So he thinks he can drive the opposition away by shutting us down.”

“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 said, raising 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. Once one opens the door to the crazy house, it’s impossible to close that door again.

I returned to my dorm room late in the afternoon.

My roommate sat at his desk, his chair tilted back, his feet propped on the desk, and the town’s newspaper sprawled out in front of him. When I entered the room, he turned his head towards me.

“Did you hear the news?”

“No. What news?” I asked.

“Someone broke into a garage downtown and stole five thousand dollars last night.”

“Really? Show me.”

Drew 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 were 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 and said, "We should be careful. This town's full of thieving drug addicts."

"Tell me about it."

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

"Me, I partied at a frat party last night. What about you?"

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

Drew 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," I replied, but obviously, I lied.

"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 thought I could drink twenty sodas. Perhaps I should continue my food experiments since the cafeteria was stocked like a 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 knew? Perhaps I would create the next great flavored soda to take America by storm. Once that money started rolling in, I would run to the financial aid office, stand in the dragon lady's doorway, drop my trousers, bend over, and tell her which area to kiss on my hairy ass.

Drew scarfed down some mysterious casserole like a bulldozer clearing a forest. At the same time, I savored my different soda 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, 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 as a cop car slowed 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 said, the one sitting on the passenger side.

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

Drew and I turned toward the officer.

"Excuse me," the police officer repeated.

"Yes, sir," Drew said. 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 as he 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 driving, right?”

“Of course not. I don’t own a car. Come on. Let’s go.”

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

I spent the whole week drifting through my boring classes. At some moments, I felt better, even though the tuition bill was not paid and the due date was approaching fast. Other times, I felt intense guilt for what I did. I thought about slipping the money into an envelope with a yellow sticky 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 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. At the same time, the bureaucrats furiously processed all the paperwork for the university.

Approaching the building, I noticed the brown paneling appeared predominantly black in the morning sun. I walked through the front entrance and headed to the bursar’s office on the first floor.

Only two silent students stood in line. I headed to the bathroom and entered a small stall. I locked the stall and leaned my back against the door. I pulled out the money and counted it. Yup, a thousand dollars. It was here and in my hands. I couldn’t return the stolen money to Mike’s Garage if I paid my bill.

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?”

The cashier, 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, grabbed my student ID, and slid it to her through the slot under the bulletproof window.

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

I glanced at her desk on the other side of the counter and saw a faded picture – a happy, smiling clerk standing with 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?” I asked.

The cashier kept looking at the computer screen. It appeared she hadn’t experienced joy, happiness, or good times in at least three centuries. Even in her picture of Mexico, she looked several hundred years younger. I imagined she probably visited there during the Middle Ages. Of course, I wouldn’t recognize that woman in the photo, except she wore the same horned-rimmed glasses.

She turned to look at 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 balance.”

“Ma’am, I don’t mean to complain, but can this interest be taken off my account?”

“Sir, I have no authority to adjust student accounts. You need to speak with the financial aid office.”

“Could I just pay the six-hundred and sixty dollars? Then I’ll contact the financial office and discuss this matter with them.”

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

“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, flipped it upside down, and counted out seven hundred dollars. Then I slid the bundle of money through the slot under the window. The cashier grabbed the cash and started counting it.

My heart started pounding while I tapped my left foot on the floor as 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 fool I was. 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 as a promising business student was arrested for burglary. Then the rumors would evolve into armed robbery of the university until the climax – a student had assaulted and tried to murder the Dean.

At least that day, the university cashier didn’t call the police, and the police hadn’t arrested me. The woman opened the cash drawer, sorted the money, and added it 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 didn’t know 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 had to steal, it would have been better to steal from a thief or an evil organization. I leave the innocent, hard-working Americans alone.

Chapter 4 – She’s Mine

Brothers, I knew I should find an honest job, but the three fast-food restaurants in this tiny town demanded a detailed resume. One or two needed a French fry technician or a burger assembly engineer. Still, the restaurants had a bottomless supply of college students to sift through. However, guilt kept 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 would give back to the community. That way, some of my good would cancel out some of my wrongs. Then everything in my universe would live in harmony, and perhaps my conscience would stop screaming at me. Of course, I didn’t want God to see me as a complete dirtbag as I stood outside and banged on the closed gates of heaven. At least God could check a couple of checkmarks for good behavior on his clipboard.

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

“Uh,” I mumbled. 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 to the back, and I’ll let you in.”

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

“Come in,” a chirpy voice called.

“Luke, another volunteer,” the woman said as she opened the door for me.

“Thank you, Sister Margaret. Come on in, young man, and have a seat,” Luke said as he stood up and came around his desk to shake my hand. Luke represented the consummate Christian with the crisp, bleached white dress shirt, the pressed trousers, polished black shoes, and a crew cut trimmed so sharply, a person could cut their finger if he were to rub his hand through Luke’s hair too quickly.

“I take it you’re from the college?” Luke asked as he sat in the wooden chair next to me.

“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 and said, “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 before the dining hall entrance. I wanted to run away, but I knew that squeaky voice at the back of my mind would not stop nagging me.

“Good afternoon, brother,” Luke said as we walked by the homeless, and he shook every hand as we passed by.

Then, we burst through the dining hall’s doors. 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 super-califragilistic-expialidocious day. Phaedra slipped ladles into the food, but once she heard us approaching, she looked up and noticed me. Her eyes became alive while her smile deepened.

Luke turned to me and said, “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 backward. I think you’re stalking me.”

“Oh, you two must know each other,” Luke said.

“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 dining room while the homeless men entered it, grabbed the yellow trays, and queued for their daily squares.

I looked at the mysterious gravy with chunks of meat bobbing up and down, floating on top like ice cubes. “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 campus cafeteria.”

“Ah, you haven’t discovered their secret yet.”

I squinted my eyes and grinned. “Secret? I thought they were 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 dump truck filled with leftovers.”

“The University must do something with those leftovers,” Phaedra added as she smiled. Then she winked.

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

The homeless men stared at us while the first man in line said, “C’mon, man. We’re hungry.”

“You serve the rice and cream of corn,” Phaedra said.

“Okay. Let’s serve these hungry people before we have a revolt.”

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.

“Are you hungry?” Phaedra asked as she looked over.

“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.

“How’s the food?” Phaedra said as she looked at me.

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

“Haha, 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. I might also join the boxing team. If I still have some spare time, I’ll become a journalist for the university newspaper.”

“Wow. You stay busy.”

“Idleness is the devil’s playground. Besides, I don’t think the 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 like you stay busy just like me. You know what. Perhaps you can show me around since I’m new to your town.”

“There’s 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 happened. Phaedra 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, and asked, “So how long have –“

The cook burst through the kitchen’s swinging doors and yelled, “Hey, you two. After eating, can you put away the food trays and clean the serving tables?”

I looked over to the kitchen 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 cleaned the dining room.

A homeless man wearing a faded green army jacket grabbed a yellow tray. Raymond popped out of the kitchen again and said, “Sorry, sir, but you are 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 in need?”

“We do, but only when the kitchen’s open. No exceptions. If we let one guy come late, then two more will come late tomorrow. 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 didn’t ask 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 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, clenching his hands into fists.

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

The homeless man relaxed and nodded his head up and down slightly. Then, he slowly sat in a metal chair by the entrance.

I ran to the stainless-steel table behind the buffet counter, where Phaedra had wrapped the tray of leftovers in plastic wrap and lined them up in a row. When I entered the room, she looked up. “I thought you were a typical man who ran away from cleaning duties.”

“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 haven’t seen a person smile so greatly 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 and a full belly.”

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

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

We crossed paths again as Phaedra walked out of the office, and we said our goodbyes. Then I saw Raymond sitting in the tiny office in the kitchen and walked in. “Hello. Should I write something down?” I asked.

“Why? You in trouble, too?”

“What do you mean?” Then I looked down and saw the logbook that Phaedra had signed; the 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 know how it is in Michigan. The cops always follow you, looking for the smallest infraction.”

“You’re free to go after you finish cleaning the dining room.”

“Sir, I left that dining hall sparkling.”

“Good. Sorry about that late guy. We’ve had trouble with him in the past.”

“I understand. Rules are rules,” I said. Then I turned and strolled out of the office. I thought Phaedra was a lovely girl who cared about the homeless, but those words community service log seared question marks in my mind. I knew I wasn’t a saint, but deep down inside us, humans have a propensity for mischief and badness. But it never depends on how bad we are; we constantly search for a mate who is as pristine and pure as a newborn kitten. I wanted a good girl, not a bad girl; who was I kidding. I dated both good and bad girls. One for marriage and the other to hang out with on those cold Michigan nights.

My mind was jumping to conclusions. Possibly 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.

A few days later, while lying on my bed, I pulled out my lucky key, which had Phaedra’s napkin wrapped around it.

My roommate, Drew, sat at his desk sketching a star battleship at war with another ship. He turned to look at 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 widened, and his mouth opened into an O. “Really? That’s awesome, dude. How’d you get it?”

“I asked for it, and she just gave it to me,” I said as I snapped 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, Drew asked. “Did she add you yet?”

“Will you stop? Everything is 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 are you gonna say to her?”

“I’ll be a little naughty,” I said as 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 sang 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.

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

“Dude, you’re crazy,” Drew shouted as he 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 always need more culture and fine foods.

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

Oh yeah. It’s next Saturday. Why? Would you like 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.

“She blew you off?” Drew asked.

“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 haven’t thought about doing something so direct like that.” Drew said while he 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. Who knows? Maybe in time, he will call me son.”

Chapter 5 – The Dean Screwed Me

After economics class, I walked to the ancient building of the Department of English. I wandered the halls searching for that elusive university newspaper. I almost gave up until a perplexed professor at his desk watched me walk by several times. The professor cleared his throat as I passed his office again. “Young man, what are you looking for?”

I returned to the doorway and looked at him. “The university newspaper,” I said.

“You will find it downstairs,” he said as he pointed to the left. “Just take that stairwell down to the basement. It’s around the corner.”

“Thank you, Professor.” Then I walked downstairs and found the university newspaper tucked between the janitor’s closet and a storage room.

I walked into an office with two vintage wooden desks and a long table with a surface scarred from years of students etching graffiti, names, and various sexual acts. 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 an old office and ancient computers?

David hopped out of his seat. “Hi, brother,” he said.

“Hey, I took you up on your offer, so here I am. What 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 could sit down and 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 dated 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.”

“Although that seems unusual, 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.”

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

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

I read the story. The university should have considered the construction cost of the football stadium. I looked at David again. “I like how the university says a lot, but at the same time, it says almost nothing. The story does not indicate how much the university underestimated the tuition.”

“I keep hearing rumors that 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 gotcha you.”

“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. “Yeah, I know. The dark tower that looms over the campus. But 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 is 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 doesn’t print 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. You’re not the first one to try.”

Two days later, I sat on a leather couch in the anteroom at Dean Tremaine’s Office. I glanced at the secretary as she read a book on how to traverse the fifteen steps to becoming a great leader. I guess she was aspiring to something higher than being the lap dog of the Dean.

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

The secretary lowered her book and glared at me. “He’s in an important meeting,” she said coldly.

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

“The Dean’s a 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 looked 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 arrived in the office. 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 sweaty, cold hand. “No problem,” I said, trying not to sound like a smart ass.

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

“So how’s your golf swing?” I asked.

The Dean smiled. After an awkward pause, he asked, “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 and leaned back on his swivel chair. “I see,” he said.

“How much did the board approve?”

“The board is still considering all the possibilities. Tuition could rise by 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. Does the tuition hike have anything 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? He said as he gave me a cold stare. Then he continued. “Unfortunately, some members of our community must spread false rumors and gossip that holds no support in reality. The stadium’s construction cost has zilch to do with the tuition enhancement.”

The Dean leaned forward in his chair, placed his hands on the desk, and smiled. “You see, the athletics department has its own costs and revenues. The university does not subsidize the athletics department.”

I just stared at the Dean. With that fake smile, I knew he was the consummate politician. I asked, “Is it correct to say, no tuition dollars will be used to finance the new football stadium?”

“No tuition dollars have ever financed the athletic department, and no dollars will be used to build the new football stadium.”

I looked at the Dean with his grin spreading from ear to ear. I knew he was lying, but I had no proof.

“Willn’t the tuition hike impact low-income students?” I asked because I knew I belonged to this group.

“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?”

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

“That’s great. How many more scholarships will the university offer?”

The Dean raised his eyebrows. “You look familiar. Have we met before?” He asked.

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

“I do believe we have met before,” the Dean said as he stared at me.

“I don’t think so.”

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

“Oh, perhaps we did meet once before.”

“I believe you left early during my speech,” the Dean said as he shook his finger at me,

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

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

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

The Dean stared at me.

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

“As I have already expounded, the responsibilities of the Financial Aid Office are 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 excellent education too expensive?”

“But do you 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 does the university 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 and declining enrollment?”

“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,” he said as he pointed at the door.

“Thank you for your time. Good day,” I said. As I was walking out of his office, I was thinking how this pompous, lying ass created one of the best business schools in the state.

That night, the Dean held a question-and-answer session with the student body at the Student Union. He planned to discuss the following year’s tuition hike or enhancement, or whatever he called it, if it helped 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 who 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 haven’t seen this many people in the student union before,” I said. “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 an electrical charge build in the air as a violent storm of students formed. “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 stood 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.”

“Greedy bastards,” another student shouted.

Other students shouted in unison. Oh, brothers, I felt sorry for the Dean for a moment. I couldn't work for 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 lay 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 following day, brothers, I sprinted to the university newspaper and showed it to David. He grabbed the paper and quickly read it, and then he burst into laughter.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"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. The theory is never put into practice here."

"But the students must know."

"I agree."

I sighed and just stared at David.

"I'll tell you what. I will put that story on the second page and hide it at the bottom," David said as he gave me a mischievous wink. "Then you'll see what'll happen."

"Fair enough."

The following day, I jumped out of bed and ran downstairs without 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.

"Goddammit," I shouted.

I returned to my dorm room and called David. After several rings, a groggy voice answered, “Hello.”

“Hey, David. Guess who?”

“Ah, I’ve given 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 not print an article that shows the university in a bad light.”

“But we must inform the students.”

“Then write another article, but tone it down. Then try again.”

After class, I studied at the library and also rewrote my article. I attempted to craft the prose so as not to upset the university’s censors.

University Considering a Tuition Increase

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 raising tuition and recognizes this will hurt some students. However, 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 the plan, that if approved, would raise tuition about ten percent next year. Many students and attendees were upset as they listened to the Dean’s 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 approved the tuition hike and stand behind the university's leadership.

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.

One student stated during Wednesday's meeting, "The university cannot continue raising tuition. It makes it tougher for 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 that the university would do everything in its power to reduce the burden on low-income students and contribute more need-based scholarships to help at-risk students. The Dean said, "The university will not sacrifice a single student as it raises tuition next year."

Brothers, when I looked at my article, I smiled like I hadn't smiled before. I knew how Picasso felt when he put the final brush strokes 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. It can't hurt to try again."

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 previous page. Somehow, I broadened an already wide smile and began reading my story.

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 raising tuition and recognizes this might compromise some students. However, the university must remain financially sustainable.

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

The Dean said the university has 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 already approved the tuition hike last year and stand behind the university's leadership.

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.

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

Another student said, "Most students receive some form of financial aid. Even though I am unhappy 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 low-income students. The university will boost funding for need-based scholarships to help 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, “Goddammit. They changed my story.” Corrupt my words, those butt lickers. The admin secretly employed me as their complicit smuck as if I had approved their tuition hike.

At that time, we didn’t know Dean Tremaine and the university administration had lied about next year’s tuition hike. The university planned to raise tuition by fifteen percent, not the slight tuition enhancement 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 need to see the Dean now,” I said as I pounded on her desk with my fists.

“His schedule is full. Please come back next week,” she said as she tried to assuage my anger.

I pounded on the desk again. “Where’s the Dean?”

“I’ll call camp –“

“Jeanine, may I enquire about the disturbance?” The Dean said as he poked his head out of the office.

“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 from him.

“Young man, what do you want?” The Dean snapped.

I placed the newspaper on his desk and pointed at the story. The Dean 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 would change it?”

“Somebody in the administration.”

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

I stared at the Dean. He had me, and by his wide smirk, he knew it. I shook my head and mumbled, “I don’t believe this.”

“Then I have no authority to request a probe into this matter,” he said as his grin widened.

I rose to my feet. Brothers, I wanted to punch the Dean square in the nose. Unfortunately, that bastard probably would let me hit him. Then, he would expel me from the university, and my college career would end. 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 as the Dean yelled, “Good day, young man.”

I marched to the university newspaper, where David leaned 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, dropped his feet, 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, where, at the end, a paper tray overflowed with thick letters.

I sat at the table, pulled the tray closer, and started opening and reading the letters. Brothers, I felt so sick. The students blamed me for the tuition hike. I wasn’t sure 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.

“So, how does it look?” David asked.

“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 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 how you think. 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 didn’t know who it was messing with. I couldn’t allow the university to screw me the way they did by altering my newspaper story. One does not allow another man to strike at you without you returning the favor.

Chapter 6 – This Was the Perfect Life

Drew followed me to the International Food Festival. “I’ll bet she doesn’t show,” he said with a wide jealous smile.

“Oh, come on. She’ll show.”

“Serious. I’ll bet you ten bones; she’ll stand you up.”

“A ten spot?” I repeated. Then I stopped and turned and held out my hand,

“All right. You’re on,” Drew replied. Then we sealed the deal with a handshake.

Turning the corner to the student union, Phaedra leaned against a stair railing leading up to the second floor. Oh, brothers, did she look comely for a naughty girl? Wearing a tight blue dress, she showed off her curves. She even weaved a little curl through her blonde hair.

“Nice,” Drew whistled 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,” I whispered while I stared at him coldly.

“Have fun, dude,” Drew whispered. Then he walked by Phaedra, and they exchanged hellos. Then Drew rushed inside.

I approached Phaedra and tried not to stare. Mamacita, oh, mine! “You look nice. So, how are you?”

“Fine. So what was that about?”

“What?” I said 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. He paid up since we were coming here.”

I lightly grabbed Phaedra’s arm and led her up the stairs. Then we headed inside and approached the entrance table.

“Are you hungry?” I asked as I turned to look at Phaedra, trying to be calm and not salivate like a puppy given a tasty treat.

“A little.”

“Let’s try some food then.”

One of the attendants said, “That’ll be ten each.”

I took the money out of my pocket and handed it to him: two tens. “Keep the change, brother.”

We walked inside a madhouse with booths, tables, and people everywhere. A cornucopia of smells and spices bombarded our noses—cumin, spicy curries, and roasted meats.

“What would you like to try first?” I asked.

“Japanese.”

We walked to the Japanese booth. Phaedra grabbed a small paper plate and used tongs to grab an assortment of sushi. “You’ll like this,” she said as she smiled and slathered a healthy swab of green goop on top of one of the sushi. Then she pushed it towards my mouth.

I bit the sushi in half, including a healthy helping of that 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. At the same time, invisible fingers started tickling the bottom of my brain.

I wasn’t sure if I turned red, but I heard. “Jax, are you okay?” Phaedra looked concerned that she took her prank a little too far.

I nodded my head up and down several times and grabbed the edge of the table to prevent myself from falling.

After another pause, Phaedra asked, “Are you all right?”

The spicy sensation withered and faded. “I’m fine. What was that green stuff?” I asked because it definitely cleared my sinuses.

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

“Wabi-sabi?”

Phaedra laughed again. “It’s made from horseradish,” she said. “It’s supposed to be good for you.”

“Ah, that was so wrong. You’re next,” I said as I slathered a healthy dab of Wasabi on a piece of sushi for her. Then I raised the sushi to her mouth.

Phaedra nibbled the side of the sushi, closed her eyes, and chewed slowly. Then, her body shivered and shook, starting from her waist and ending at her head.

“How’s the sushi?” I asked.

“Perfecto mundo.”

“C’mon, let’s try something else.”

We walked to the Thai booth. An exotic Asian woman with wavy black hair and olive eyes stood behind the table. I wasn't 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 on it. Then she handed me the plate with two small plastic forks.

"What's this?" I asked.

"Fried fish with shredded papaya. It's a popular dish in my country," the woman replied.

"I thought papaya was reddish," I asked.

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

I held the plate while Phaedra grabbed the tiny forks 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 bit spicy, huh," I said. "But it's delicious."

"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 – tiny red and green chili pepper flakes. "I think I found the culprits."

We used our forks to move the chilies to the side and 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."

"So, what did you think of the Thai woman?" Phaedra asked as we walked away from the booth.

"What Thai woman?"

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

"Oh, that Thai woman."

"Yes."

"I didn't 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,” I said as I tried to divert the conversation away from the Thai woman.

We walked by the Mexican food booth. That’s so passé, living in a tiny town with three Mexican restaurants. Of course, who could forget taco night at the cafeteria on Wednesday? I thought they served beef tacos, but I wasn’t entirely sure. I heard food science was performing miracles with soybeans and leftover organ meats that tasted like ground beef.

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

“Hey, Jax,” Drew said as he wandered over.

“Hey Drew. So what’re you up to?” I asked.

“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 at me. Of course, he had to ask the most stupid question: “What’ll you guys be doing later tonight?”

Phaedra and I glanced at each other, and then we 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,” Drew said. Then he 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 there. “Hey, let’s try a Turkish gyro,” I said.

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. 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 was okay. I knew that I was not the only guy interested in her, but hey, she was here with me. I bit into my gyro—my taste buds came alive as the food waltzed across my tongue.

Phaedra garbled, “HmMMM.”

“I know. This is definitely not cafeteria food. I wish we had the International Food Festival every week. Then we’ll be living the good life as students. Of course, I wouldn’t graduate and leave this food.”

I turned to the Turkish guy, “May I please have another gyro, but without vegetables and sauce?”

The guy stood there as if he didn’t hear me even though three feet separated us. Guys can be suck pricks. Men only fight over three things – money, respect, and women. It was obvious he was jealous. I am like, dude, back off. She’s mine.

“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,” I said as 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,” she said with a mischievous smile.

“Ah, so that’s your secret,” I replied as 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 save it for later?”

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

“Friends?”

“C’mon, I’ll show you,” I said as I led her outside.

“Who are your friends?”

“It’ll be better to show you.”

“Where are we going?”

“Math-Sciences Building.”

“You have friends in that building?”

“No. They don’t live inside.”

“Then where do they live?”

“It’s a little difficult to explain. It’s better that I’ll show you.”

We approached the Math-Sciences Building and walked past the entrance. Phaedra stopped at the entrance and just stood there. “Isn’t this where we’re supposed to go?” She asked as she pointed at the glass doors.

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

“In there? Let me guess; are you feeding the homeless people 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 ensured 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,” I called. Discordant meow sounds came from inside the bush, and 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, started petting him, and looked at Phaedra. “Hey, Phaedra. I believe this little guy is dying to meet your acquaintance,” I said while using my hand and waving 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, cerulean baby blues.”

Phaedra reached for the kitten, slowly touched his head, and petted the furry little guy. In contrast, the kitten began purring, and Phaedra started to smiling. She became an ailurophile.

“I found them when I was walking to class one day. 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 so the kittens could eat peacefully.

Phaedra and I started walking towards downtown. “What’ll happen to the kittens when winter comes?” She asked.

“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 said as I reached over and held Phaedra’s hand. “Sometimes a man has to break a few rules, especially when it serves the greater good.”

“Do you plan to break any rules tonight?” Phaedra asked.

“I just go with the flow. But most likely, some rules will be broken.”

I did return for the kittens one night in December when a thick snow pelted the ground, but the three rascals 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 passed, wandering from house to house. Then we approached the 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 headed inside and sat at a table in a dark corner, where we could get a little privacy.

“What’d ya like?”

“Something chocolatey.”

I approached the counter and saw the chalk menu on the back wall behind the cash register.

“What’d you like?” The barista asked.

“I’ll take a hazelnut cappuccino 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 said as I reached into my pocket for money to pay for the drinks. Then I returned to the table where Phaedra sat down.

“So what’ll you do after you graduate?” Phaedra asked.

“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. What about you?”

“My dad demands that I enroll in law school and work as an attorney.”

“That’s cool. But your dad works at 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. “Thank you, miss,” I said. “But I could’ve brought the drinks myself and saved you the trouble.”

“No problem,” the barista said. 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 drinks to rude customers.”

“She probably thinks you’re flirting with her.”

“I see your point. But after working a tough summer and two years out of school, I appreciated 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-paced environment—there were millions of things to do every day. There were no pats on the back for a job well done. There was 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. You’ve got to be kidding.”

“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?” Phaedra asked as she looked at me.

“I thought it was a great idea at the time, 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 looks like we’re the last customers here.” Then I looked into Phaedra’s

eyes. I wasn't sure who initiated it, but we leaned toward each other and shared a kiss.

The barista returned to the coffee shop from the kitchen carrying a trashcan. Then she headed to the kitchen again.

We kissed again.

The barista returned to the dining area, grabbed the dishes and trash, and returned to the kitchen. Then she came back into the dining area and started wiping the tables.

I looked at my watch and asked, "Should I walk you home?"

"Okay," she said.

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 as a little boy."

"Can I have it?"

"Sorry. It's my lucky key. It has protected me since childhood. If you take it, I will be lost in a world full of locked doors and rude people."

Phaedra stuck it into her pocket.

"Can I have my key back, please?"

"Nooooope. Finders, keepers, losers, weepers."

"I see. I think I heard that one before."

We rose, 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, crossing 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 to a tall hill with massive stone walls on both sides.

"Where does this go?"

"It's a shortcut."

When we reached the first level, Phaedra leaned against the wall. I slipped my hands around her waist and held her while I felt her inviting warmth, and we kissed, kissed, and kissed. As we were locked in a kiss, I slipped my hand into her pocket, grabbed my skeleton key, and 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 blurted.

I slipped the spoon and skeleton key into my pocket. When I return home, I’ll just slip the spoon into the mailbox at the coffee shop. We kissed again and again and again.

“It’s getting late,” I said.

“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. Then my phone started vibrating. I answered it.

“Hey man,” Drew said. “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.”

“Is Mom calling?” Phaedra asked.

“No, it wasn’t Mom. Unfortunately, it was my roommate.”

“Why’s he calling you?”

“He asked for 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 from the bright porch light, and we kissed again.

“Goodbye,” I said.

Phaedra reached for her keys, walked to the front door, and unlocked it. She turned to glance at me and stepped inside.

I noticed she left the door slightly ajar. I stood there for a minute while a heated debate ricocheted back and forth between the good guy and the bad guy in my mind. Shall I enter, or shall I close the door and return home?

Of course, brothers, I entered the quiet house. “Phaedra. Phaedra,” I whispered, 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 entered the house and tiptoed upstairs. “Phaedra. Phaedra,” I whispered.

I tapped on each door and opened it slightly. “Phaedra.” Finally, I tapped on the master bedroom door and opened it. “Phaedra.”

“Just a minute.”

I stood in the doorway, holding onto the jamb. Then Phaedra came out wearing skimpy pajamas.

“You left the door open downstairs.”

Phaedra demurely walked over, and I wrapped my arms around her again. 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 toward the king-size bed with a brown leather backrest. “This may not be a good idea,” Phaedra whispered as she pulled away.

“I like holding you in my arms. I like kissing you,” I said. “Your lips taste so sweet.” Then we kissed some more as I guided her several more inches towards the bed.

“You won’t respect me,” Phaedra said as she pulled away again.

“I like the sweetness of your luscious lips,” I said. Then we kissed some more. Then I started kissing the nape of her neck and nibbled on the lobe of her ear.

Phaedra stopped kissing, pulled away again, and asked, “Do you love me?”

“I love kissing and caressing you,” I said as I leaned towards her to kiss her ears and neck.

Phaedra returned to my arms, and we started kissing again. Finally, we sat on the bed’s edge and continued kissing. Then we gradually lay 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, where 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 it, and the painting swiveled open 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 behind a gaudy painting. The owner didn’t know that the safe manufacturers had put all the thick metal in the front, with a thin metal sheet protecting the back. I only had to pry the safe out of the wall and open the back like a tin can.

I stopped myself. Brothers, what was I thinking? I wasn't a professional burglar. I just did this one minor discretion to help pay for college. That was it. It was time to be a good boy.

I closed the painting, turned the lights off, and returned to the master bedroom to sleep with Phaedra. If this were college life, I wouldn't want to graduate. I could stay here forever, taking classes and switching majors every couple of semesters, perhaps a new girlfriend every year. This was the perfect life.

Chapter 7 – The Damn Financial Aid Office, Again

Brothers, what a beautiful walk home! The morning sun rose above the horizon, filling the sky with soft reds, oranges, and yellows. 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.

"Hey," I said as I approached the mailboxes and nodded my head.

"Hey," he rebutted. He glanced in my direction and nodded his head as two men showed respect for each other.

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 identical envelopes that rested at an angle in their mailboxes.

Brothers, I had paid my tuition bill a week ago. Still, another bill was waiting for me in my mailbox like I was walking across a street corner while a cheap hooker stood there and blocked 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 said the university overcharged me and would return some of my money."

"Yeah, right," he said as he laughed. "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 I am. I am even becoming one of Dean Tremaine's favorite students."

The student started laughing. Then he added, “By the way, Daisy will throw another party tonight. It’ll be a 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 didn’t have any more money.

I went to my empty room because 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. “The guy cannot even pass his exams,” I mumbled. “Damn. The state of Michigan does not pick the winners when they hand out that free scholarship money.” I returned his letter to his desk exactly how I found it.

I grabbed my backpack, removed several heavy textbooks, stuck new ones in, and headed to the financial aid office. My favorite office is 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 loved it when the secretary would say, “It’ll be a minute.” Yeah, sure. A minute stretched into thirty, but I prepared for this expected contingency, opened my finance textbook, and began reading.

After an eternity, the secretary said, “Mr. Krause will see you now.”

“Thank you,” I said as I snapped my textbook shut, stuck it under my arm, and walked to his office. Mr. Krause sat in his chair, hiding his head behind a newspaper while his feet rested on his desk. I sat down in the armchair and plopped my textbook onto the floor. Mr. Krause turned the page in his newspaper.

“Uh ugh.” I groaned in an exaggerated voice.

He turned the newspaper page again.

“I couldn’t have missed them, Mr. Krause. Nice shoes.”

Mr. Krause whistled and followed it with “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 don’t mind.”

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 customer service training. Then I saw the boxing trophies lined up like soldiers on a small bookshelf behind his desk.

Mr. Krause closed the newspaper and slid his feet off the desk. Then he picked up a fingernail 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?” Mr. Krause asked as he continued picking at his fingernails, avoiding eye contact.

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 have a balance in your student account. You ought to pay your bill then.”

“That’s the problem. I don’t have any money to pay the bill, sir.”

“The university will automatically withdraw you from classes next week. You will lose the credit hours and grades you worked hard on this semester.”

“But I’ve been studying 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 ask them to help you.”

“But... but they can’t. My parents are low on funds. They’re, they’re stuck with a fortune in medical bills.” I tried not to scream at Mr. Krause. It felt so humiliating sitting here begging like a homeless person on a street corner for change in a pedestrian’s pocket. “Besides, I thought I walked into the financial aid office for

help. I thought your job was to help poor, struggling students like myself.”

“Sir, we did help you. We used the federal government’s formulas, and you received the maximum financial aid the university can offer,” Mr. Krause said. Then he dropped the fingernail file, 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 asked as corybantic thoughts gushed through my mind. “What does that have to do with anything?”

“Do you drink alcohol with your friends?”

I grunted a laugh. “Sometimes,” I replied. Why? Am I not allowed to indulge 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, too much money.” Such an asshole! “I probably drank a case of beer since I came here. That averages about two beers a week.”

Then Mr. Krause pinched his index finger and thumb together and inhaled imaginary marijuana smoke from an imaginary joint. “What about a little reefer?” He asked.

I could tell he was no stranger to reefer madness. I just wanted to stand up, grab 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.

“Do you use drugs?” he asked.

I sighed. “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.”

“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 cost me a fortune.” Mother cock cleaner, oh you! “I splurged my financial aid and drove around campus in -”

“We are done here,” he snapped.

I remained defiant and knew he asked me to go, but my sarcastic mouth refused to stay shut. It had a mind of its own and always demanded 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 am not trying to be 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 said as I bent down to pick up my book. As I stood up and approached the door, my defiant voice continued, and I turned and glared at Mr. Krause. “I guess I’ll go rob a bank. That way, the university will get its money,” I said.

“Good luck,” he replied, reaching for his newspaper again and resting his feet on the desk.

Brothers, I finally understood the financial aid office. The world overflows with contradictions and conundrums – the office of financial assistance 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 actual function of the financial aid officer is to try to squeeze as much money as possible from every student because the universities are as greedy as those Wall Street bankers. They know that students find a way to pay, and most students always do. Otherwise, the university would change its ways. They would change their system.

Chapter 8 – Not Again?

Oh, brothers. I didn't want to do this again, another break-n-take, but I had no money, and another tuition bill wrapped itself around my neck like a noose and was choking me to death.

I wandered 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 Bar and Grill. 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 for lunch yesterday. We marveled over the delectable entrees like beef tartar, escargot, liver pate, and French onion soup with croutons and sprinkled shredded Swiss cheese. The place also offered traditional American food, such as juicy-dripping hamburgers and crispy French fries.

I explored the enclosed catwalk that connected the second floor of the Library to the building on the other side of the street. I smiled as I walked up the steps to the second floor and stared at a massive mosaic window. My opportunity lay 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, where I feigned a stomachache so Drew would stop pestering me about Daisy's approaching party. This was 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 when I returned to the dorm room.

I snuck out of the dorm room around midnight wearing clothes I bought at a second-hand store. I walked 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, walked up to the second floor, and crossed the catwalk to the other side. Then I stopped at the mosaic window—my secret entrance into the Library.

I peered through one of the translucent panes and saw dim lights here and there illuminating the aisles around the dark tables and bar.

All the barstools 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 opened the sash lock. 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 through the window. Then I slid in. I rose and closed the window but left it unlocked.

I tiptoed to the manager's office next to the far corner of the bar. I gripped the doorknob 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, opened each drawer, and shone the light as I sorted through every paper and document. Hmmm, hmmm, hmmm! 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 pulled out one drawer and another and then another. Just more files and documents. What was this? Frustrated, I turned and bumped into an end table covered with a thick tablecloth. Thump!

I rubbed my knee, "What the fuck?" I yelled. Then I kicked the end table, but it didn't budge. 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. It had a foot-long lever and a large black dial with faded numbers and tick marks. Brothers, it was a beaut. They don't make them like that anymore.

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 could I drag this thing home. Besides, the police in Marquette were way too clever and would notice a young man pulling a safe along the street.

I walked around the office and straightened things so the restaurant owner would not suspect anything when he came to open the restaurant the next day. I left the office and returned to the mosaic window.

I heard drunken arguments echo up the catwalk and into the bar, even though I couldn't see them. They walked along the street below. I waited until their arguing vanished into the murky night.

I found the windowpane, which 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. Luckily, 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 and rang up the sale. "That'll be three-fifty."

I pulled out four bones and passed them to him.

You think he would at least look at me. Who in the hell buys scotch tape at one o'clock in the morning when all the pedestrians who walk by this place are completely drunk?

I returned to the Library and walked across the catwalk. I taped the two pieces of the windowpane together and then taped it 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 could spot my master rigging.

I returned to the dorm room. And the good news was that Drew didn't stir as I came in. I undressed and crawled between the sheets in my bed.

The following day, Drew, lying on his bed, propped himself on the elbow and looked over at me. He asked, "Dude, do you have any aspirin?"

"Sorry, but the pharmacy's closed."

"You've missed a bitchin party last night."

"Unfortunately, my stomach needed a break. I can't 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?”

“Why would you ask that?”

“Oh dude, nothing.”

“No, no, no. If you know something, just say it.”

“I saw her at the party.”

Well, brothers, being a thinker was smarter than being a puncher. 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,” Drew said. Then he lay down and fell asleep.

I headed to my morning class. After class, I stopped at the student union for some coffee, and I bought several small packets of aspirin. Then I headed to the computer lab and found a vacant workstation towards the back where someone had forgotten to log off.

Shaking my head, I sat down. That person even opened his browser with his email account 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 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 YouTube.

I found a YouTube video where a guy with a goatee and a long ponytail showed how he opened a safe using a long crowbar within two minutes. 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 weight to apply force to the crowbar and worked the crowbar back and forth while the safe’s lips opened a little each time.

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 to lock it. The metal to the safe's door peeled back a little, and the door popped open.

I watched several more YouTube videos in which various dubious people 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 left the aspirin on Drew's desk. Then I walked to the salvage yard, a mass graveyard of ancient rusting relics on the other side of town. The remnants of Michigan's past glory as a manufacturing powerhouse.

I walked through the seven-foot-high, metal mesh gate and between rows of old rusty cars stacked three cars high on top of each other. 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 lay at random places everywhere. Along the back of the building, large metal shelves reached the ceiling, and every shelf overflowed with old, dirty parts.

I walked to the office, where 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 get 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 need to make a profit, too."

"Okay, okay. Here's your twenty." The customer said as he 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 can I do you for?”

“I’m looking for a crowbar,” I stretched my hands outward. It should be about this 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 removing the drywall between the family and living rooms.”

“Oh, I think I may have something,” the clerk said, then disappeared into the warehouse.

Memories flooded my mind. I remember my mom staying at grandma’s house for the weekend while dad and I renovated the house. I helped my dad move a couch and end table away from the wall that divided the living and family rooms. Then, we moved a desk to the other side of the wall. Finally, we laid large, old bedsheets on both sides of the wall.

“Pull it tight, boy,” my dad yelled. That way, cleanup will 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 bedsheets. The drywall clung to the wall in several places, refusing to fall to the floor.

My 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.

My dad passed the crowbar to me. I shoved it between another piece of drywall and the stud, pushing 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, pushed and pulled back and forth, and a chunk of drywall fell to the floor.

After removing another piece, my dad said, "Just think. You could move the world if you have a crowbar long enough."

"Move the world? That would be so cool."

"Move the world," I mumbled as the clerk returned to the service counter holding a rusty crowbar.

"Here you go," the clerk said 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 fancy store and buy a brand-new spanking crowbar made in China. This one is made in the good ole USA with real American steel."

"But it's too short."

"I'll tell you what, I throw in a metal pipe, too," he said as he reached down, 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 didn't bargain with his fishing buddy, so 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 bet I could find some exciting things here on a nightly stroll, 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. Then, I slipped the bag over the pipe and crowbar to conceal them.

I woke up one morning, and Drew was in a deep sleep, snoring. I slipped out of bed and put 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, 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 to conceal them. It would be suspicious for a young man to walk around a neighborhood with a pipe and crowbar sticking out of his backpack.

I headed out and reached the Library Bar and Grill 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 were passed 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, unlatched the window, and opened it. I tossed the pane of glass onto the cushioned seat of the booth, which caught and muffled the glass sounds.

I tossed my backpack onto the booth seat, climbed in head first, and closed the window.

I grabbed my backpack and tiptoed to the office, slowly entering the dark office. Then, I closed the door. Turning on my cell phone's flashlight, I approached the safe, pulled the tablecloth off the safe, and tossed it into the corner.

I removed my backpack, the pipe, and the crowbar and placed the instruments on top of the safe. Then, using my index finger, I traced the lip of the safe's door.

Crash!

It sounded like someone fired a cannon inside the office. The loud bang almost gave me a heart attack as my heart skipped a beat. I ran out of the office and raced to the window, where I lay down on the booth seat.

Once my heart slowed, I rose and returned to the office, where I saw my phone on the floor with the flashlight still on while the light dimmed. 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 farther down and continued.

After fifteen minutes of dripping sweat and burning muscles, I peeled the upper lip on the safe. It looked like it would take much longer than two minutes, but it wasn't like I would film a video and post it on YouTube.

I continued prying, prying, and moving along the safe's lips until I worked on the area where the bars slid across it. Finally, after thirty minutes, the safe opened slightly. After another twenty minutes of exhaustion and sweat, the safe's door squeaked open.

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 found a manila envelope, which I tore open 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. “Hey girl, how are you?” I answered.

“I'm fine. What're you 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 and the sweetness of your lips. I miss -”

“Would you like to come over?”

“Oh, I really would like 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 weren't 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 as 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 you doing?”

“Oh, I'm currently entertaining a certain female species.”

“Oh, cool. Can she hook me up with one of her 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 all the 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 lay on the booth seat. I looked around for it and saw a reflection farther down, which I grabbed and slipped into my backpack.

I climbed onto the booth's seat and jumped out the window head first. Then I turned around and closed the window but didn't latch it. Besides, the owner would 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 remembered using 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 shown through the clear 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?" A person hidden in the shadows asked.

"What?" I replied as I looked down.

Two white eyes stared at me as a homeless man stretched out an open hand. "Please. I'm hungry." I slipped my hand into my front pocket, pulled out a bill, 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 connecting the city's two halves. I climbed a steep hill to the 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 the car drive by while four shadowy faces stared back at me. Perhaps they thought

they would watch a Wednesday show as a depressed college student plunged to his death from the bridge. Sorry, brothers, but tonight was not the night, or at least I wasn't jumping. At this moment, my life was not looking too bad. I got a girl waiting for me in bed, and the bills would be paid tomorrow. At that moment, life was good.

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 threw them into the dark waters below.

Plopped.

Then, I pulled out the windowpane, held together with scotch tape. I let it slide from my hands into the water.

Plunked.

I grabbed the can of Coke and pulled back the tab. Oh, brothers, the sweet song of the soda's fizzle beckoned me as I drank a large swallow. I swung the backpack on my shoulder and walked to the other side of the bridge to meet Phaedra.

At eight o'clock the following day, my cell phone rang. I bolted up and looked around at the unfamiliar surroundings. Then I saw my cell phone 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 know, your associate at the student newspaper. 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."

“Who’s that?” Phaedra mumbled.

“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 sweet strawberry. Then I hopped out of bed, entered 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 played havoc on my insides, so I would grant my stomach a reprieve and eat out for a change. Of course, I could afford to take my girl with me too but she was starting to cost a little bit.

I entered the bathroom slowly, stuck part of my head out, and saw 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 empty cans of Coke into a neighbor’s trash bin and walked downtown as fog shrouded the buildings and trees. Approaching the Library Bar and Grill felt surreal, as if I had dreamed of my misdeed.

As I approached the corner, 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 with 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,” one of the cops said.

“Hi, I work for the university newspaper,” I said. “I am here to write a story about the break-in.”

The officer holding the notebook walked in another direction while the other officer approached me. “What’s your name?” He asked.

“Jax.”

“Jax, what?”

“Jax Gamble.”

“Do you have an 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 ID and handed it to the officer. He studied it for a minute and passed it back.

“What happened here?” I asked.

“A crime,” the police officer retorted.

“Thank you, sir. I don’t think I need Sherlock Holmes to tell me that one. Could you be a little more specific?”

“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.”

As 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 open.

“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 the 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."

The owner stared at me.

"Can you tell me how much was stolen?"

"The police will catch those dirty bastards," the owner screamed as he shook his index finger at me.

"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 and added, "Wow. A thousand bucks. How did the thieves break into the bar?"

"Not now," the owner yelled, and 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 tiny town, so a small article will be appropriate."

I slipped the phone into my front jean's pocket. While looking down, I spotted a ball of used scotch 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, held up the pen, and shook it. "I dropped my pen onto the ground," I said, while the detective didn't see the tape ball stuck under the notepad. He turned and entered the Library Bar and Grill.

Chapter 9 – I am Losing Her

Phaedra invited me to the honors banquet for the top business students. Brothers, I wasn't even there for five minutes and rammed against a nerd blockade at the entrance. One nerd stood in front of the entrance to the dining hall. "Only top university students can enter here," he snapped as he turned his nose up at me. "I don't think you're a top student."

"How do you know," I replied. "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?" I asked.

"Do you have an invitation?"

"Of course." I reached into my front jeans pocket and pulled out a fancy vanilla envelope I had folded several times. I unfolded the envelope, pulled out the invitation, and handed it to the nerd standing at the entrance.

The guy examined the invitation as he held it up to the light. "It's looks genuine."

"What do you mean looks genuine? Of course, it's genuine," I said as I crossed my fingers. "The Dean and I are close, real close. Who knows. Perhaps next year, I will guard the entrance to the Honors Banquet."

The nerd passed it to his twin, who scrutinized it. "It looks real. Perhaps we should ask the Dean."

"Go ahead. He's the one who handed it to me this afternoon," I said as I pointed to the Dean's signature. "See, he even signed it."

The nerd blocking the dining hall entrance shrugged his shoulders and gasped. Then he stepped away from the entrance to let me pass.

"Thanks guys," I said.

I slipped the invitation into its envelope, folded it along the original crease lines, and slipped it into my pocket.

Brothers, I entered through the dining hall 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 a dark closet. When I was ready to wear them, I would throw them into a dryer for five minutes with a bounce sheet or hang them out the window on their hangers for a couple of hours in the spring air. Of course, the faded blue sneakers matched my superb garb quite well.

As I walked into the dining hall, 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.

Phaedra turned in my direction. “Hi,” she said.

“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,” the Dean replied.

“I want you to meet Jax,” Phaedra said.

The Dean crinkled his nose when he looked at me. He took a minute as he wavered whether he should extend his hand for a handshake, “Young man, I believe we have met before,” the Dean said as he extended his hand for a shake.

I shook his cold, sweaty hand. “Yes, sir, we have met. You remember the interview for the newspaper article,” Jax said as he winked at the Dean.

“I must say that was quite a splendid piece.”

“Of course. Thank you for the opportunity to interview you and for the wealth of information you provided me.”

“Daddy, this is the one I’ve been telling you about.”

The Dean pointed at me. “This is the young man you spoke highly of?”

“Yes, Daddy.”

The Dean frowned, but a fake smile reappeared on his face. He must put on a show in front of his colleagues. The Dean continued staring at me. “My daughter has spoken highly of you.”

“I’m sure she has exaggerated just a little.”

“I am sure she has.”

“Have you seen the art gallery?” Phaedra asked.

“The art gallery?” I repeated.

“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, which had 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 all the gallery walls on the other, with three chiseled marble statues of Greek gods standing in a row along the far wall.

We walked to the first oil painting, where I wrapped my hand around Phaedra’s waist, felt the warmth of her body, and whispered into her ear. “Thanks for the invite,” I said. And boy, did she smell good, like a field of roses.

Phaedra looked 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,” she said. Then she looked at me demurely. 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 in the sky.”

“Yeah. I think I can see it now. It’s like the northern lights marched across the canvas, one by one.” Brothers, I really didn’t see it. I just saw bright paints thrown randomly onto the canvas. I’d seen toddlers paint better masterpieces than what hung before my eyes, but Phaedra looked way too beautiful, and I went along.

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 see who had entered the room. “I hope I am not disturbing you two,” the Dean said. 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 me.

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 with Phaedra to his right.

As everyone at the table chatted, I noticed a handsome guy sitting next to Phaedra with light brown curly hair, a chiseled physique, and sparkling blue eyes. Phaedra occasionally laughed 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 utterly forgotten about me.

The Dean rose, held his wine glass up, filled it with ice water, and tapped the side with a spoon. “Ladies and gentlemen,” The Dean called while the murmurs and slight chattering died down.

The Dean started, “Thank you for taking the time to attend 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 a future leader, you shall not forget your alma mater and the good things the university has given you. Also, we shall not forget your hard work and achievements. Thus, hosting this honors banquet would greatly benefit the faculty and me. So I devote a toast.” The Dean saluted with his wine glass, then 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, where 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 like fallen dominoes. Then, there is a platter of cured sliced meats with a bowl of pâté 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 cheese 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 placed a white plate with a filet mignon with bacon wrapped around the edges 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 was 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 the next day, I shall return to the cruddy food in the cafeteria, and it looked like I needed to talk with my girl.

I noticed the nerdy kid had come in and handed the Dean a guest list. When the Dean browsed through the list, he stared at me. Then he 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. With my fork, I pushed the baked potatoes topped with sour cream and chives

to the side of the plate. I hurriedly sliced the filet mignon into small bites and shoveled it into my mouth as fast as possible.

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 would like to speak with you in the art gallery.”

I nodded my head, “Okay,” as I shoveled the remaining potato into my mouth.

The nerdy kid walked away, and I grabbed another napkin and filled it with 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,” the Dean said as he frowned at me.

I looked at him and shrugged my shoulders.

“I imagine my daughter had something to do with this little escapade.”

“Well, sir. She asked me to meet you, so how could I say no.”

The Dean 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 unsure why I did it, but my crouch began itching, so I started scratching 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 have a future, but you can’t see it beyond your pompous nose. You never know. I may marry your daughter and give you many 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 said. “That young man sitting next to my daughter has a bright future.” Then 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, seeing Phaedra in a deep conversation with Steve.

“Thank you, sir, for the delicious food and splendid conversation,” I said as I turned to look at the Dean. 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. The next thing I knew, 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 furry 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 for coffee. After ordering, she returned, sat across from me, and opened the packaging of 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 so sure. It takes a while for daddy to adjust to new people. Some people think he can be too strict or 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 red, 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,” she said.

That was when I knew something was wrong. Phaedra was always a talker, and her silence had a foreboding, a warning.

“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.”

Now I knew who this prick was. I’d only seen one Mercedes on this campus, which had to be this dude’s. The next time I saw it, I would pick up a rock and hurl it at the car as it sped by. “I think I saw that car. It’s white, isn’t it?” I asked.

“I think so. Why? You getting jealous?”

I pointed at myself, “Who me? Maybe just a little. The dude hasn’t 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 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 following table turned to look at me. “Sorry, dude, but I think you’ve lost her.”

“Hey stranger, I am not trying 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 have a backup plan. I’ll just shackle her to my bed in the dorm room. That way, she’ll have 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 remembered it all. It all made 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, where 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 dabbing a little more makeup before work. She even started going to work early.

Dad would question her at the dinner table, and she would always reply, “Don’t be jealous. He’s nobody; he’s just a regular customer.”

My dad would drop his fork onto his half-eaten dinner plate and leave the table, angry.

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, and a blue striped tie dangling in front emerged from my mom’s video store.

“That’s the guy,” my dad said. Then he looked at me and said, “Wait here, boy. We’re just going to talk to the guy.”

“Why, Dad?”

“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 seat to get a better view through the front 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. “Stay away from her, or you’re dead,” my dad screamed.

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?” Dad said.

“Okay.”

“Just remember, don’t let another man touch your stuff,” Dad said as he pulled out of the parking lot. “If you let a man touch your stuff once, 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 into my backpack.

The cashier came over. “I’m sorry, but your friend didn’t pay,” she said.

“Why am I not surprised,” I said as 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 hockey team’s captain.”

The cashier gave me a puzzled look. “I don’t understand,” she said.

I pulled out my wallet and handed her a twenty. “I’m just kidding. Keep the change.”

The guy sitting at the following table looked over again, shaking his head back and forth. “Man, she looks like trouble.”

“Perhaps it’s better for that other guy to take her. Then he can take over the payments,” I said.

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 and spotted the white Mercedes with shiny chrome rims and pinstripes parked near the back entrance. Of course, it had to be a brand-new Mercedes.

I saw a good-sized rock by the tree, so I went over and picked it up. I tossed the rock back and forth between my hands. Then, I hurled the rock as hard as I could.

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 around the dorm’s sidewalks.

I thought, how could I keep Phaedra? Should I be like dad and get two friends to gang up on him and beat the shit out of him? 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 severely that he wouldn’t walk straight again, let alone ice skate. Nah, I wasn’t gay, but was it gay to violate him with a hockey stick?

Hmmm. Dad was right. An old-fashioned ass-kicking would do the trick, and I wondered if I could find the phone number of my dad's friends.

Chapter 10 – It Gets Even Crazier

Brothers, you wouldn't believe me if I told you. I wouldn't believe it until I witnessed its insane glory. Have you had one of those days when everything started out dull but then became crazy?

I was just studying in the library. The current tuition bill was paid. I had several meals off campus, so my stomach was still in food heaven. And sometimes my girl met me at night. What more could I ask for? Here I was, with my books spread out in front of me, sitting at a large table on the second floor of the university library.

David walked by and noticed me. He stopped, turned around, and returned to the table. "Hello, Jax."

"Hey, David. So what's new? I haven't seen you in a while."

"Not much." Then David picked up one of my lock-picking books, opened it, and leafed through the pages. "Oh, recreational reading?"

"I'm a college student. When do I have time for recreational reading? But I thought I could earn some extra money and work as an apprentice for the locksmith in town."

David 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 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."

"That's great," David said. I mean, about helping the unfortunate." He paused and then asked, "Do..." He stammered and then looked down.

I folded my hands on the desk and looked up at him.

David looked at me again. Then he looked around to see if anyone was eavesdropping.

"Well, it appears you have something on your mind," I said. "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 said as 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, where I would return in no time. Then I rose and slung the backpack over my shoulder. “Let’s go,” I said.

We didn’t talk until we had walked out through the library’s glass doors. We walked to the side of the library, where a few students trekked, and then sat down on a bench.

David looked here, then there, and then at me again. “I’m just making sure no one’s around,” he said.

“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 admit, the Dean and I have our troubles.”

“Are you still upset the admin changed your newspaper article?”

“That’s an understatement,” I gasped.

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 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 open 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 gates of heaven.”

“Look, I admire your enthusiasm, but what could we do to the Dean?”

David opened his gym bag, pulled a towel halfway out, 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. “We’re hoping you would,” he whispered.

“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, and 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 on the weekends, but, on the inside, he was a maniacal, Christian zealot who was 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 a 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,” he said. “See how simple it is.”

“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’d 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 hate him. I could relieve my bladder on the ground of the Dean's final resting place. However, I calmed 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 in my life, I wasn't 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. "Then give me the gun," I said.

David placed the gym bag on his lap, unzipped it, and pulled the white towel out. Then he handed the towel to me with the gun wrapped inside.

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," he said and added, "God always has a plan."

"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 find a gun in the offering tray."

"Yes. That's exactly how I found it."

"Well then, how could I go against God's wishes? The Lord stands on our side and wants to meet the Dean in person. Then let's arrange the meeting."

"Yes, siree. God would like to meet him, personally." Then David looked directly into my eyes, "We knew we could count on you."

"Of course, you can count on 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.

There was no calculator. I moved the books around, but there was still no calculator. Just to be complete, I checked the chairs, but there was still no calculator.

Boy brothers, this town was 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 sat down. At one point, I thought I hallucinated my conversation with David, so I slipped off the bed, grabbed my backpack, unzipped it, and pulled out the white towel. I unfolded the towel, 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 was knocking on my dorm door. I let Phaedra in, and we lay on the bed together. We started kissing each other as we fondled and touched each other’s bodies.

The 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,” I said.

“Oh, that sounds interesting. Which class do you study that?”

I had to restrain myself from jumping off the bed and thumping 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 lay still for a while as Phaedra lay next to me. 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 some fast food and then check out the party.”

Drew glanced at his watch, then at us. “What’ll you guys be doing?”

“We’ll talk for a while, finish our discussion of the butterflies’ mating habits, and then 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 Drew’s arm and landed on the floor. Drew jumped off the bed and picked it up. “Thanks, dude,” he said as he looked at us. “Can you introduce me to one of your friends, Phaedra?”

I looked at Phaedra and winked. “Of course,” Phaedra said. “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 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,” I said 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 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 her up and down her legs. Then I removed my clothes and mounted her.

After we had made love, I lay on my back with Phaedra's head lying on my shoulder. I started the conversation: "You know, a couple of 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?"

"Dad said something about it. 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 the 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 needed 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, I thought I wrote one piece, but I was mistaken and wrote something entirely different."

"It sounds like you're going crazy."

"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. Oh god. Secretary of Education. Then what? Governor of the state. If I must make an enemy, I might as well choose the most formidable opponent. One who could really screw your life up.

“Then just do this one thing for me,” I said. “Just tell your dad to be careful.”

I looked down at Phaedra while her chest rose and fell rhythmically, and her eyes were shut.

“Phaedra,” I whispered.

Phaedra’s chest continued to rise and fall.

I looked over at the closet, the door slightly ajar, where 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 onto a police detective’s desk and tell them the story of how David conspired to kill 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 was the burglar who terrorized this tiny town? Oh, brothers, there must be another way.

“Phaedra, would you like to go to the party?” I whispered.

Phaedra began snoring.

I studied her face as her chest rose and fell. Brothers, I didn’t know why I felt this strange sensation that I was seeing Phaedra for the last time. It felt like she would never return here again once she walked out that door. I would lose her forever.

Chapter 11 – Returned Home One Last Time

Brothers, you knew when you looked at your ringing cell phone and got 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 jeans pocket and saw Mom calling. “Hi, Mom,” I answered.

“Jax,” Mom said as tears and pouting bombarded my ear.

“Mom! Mom! Are you okay?”

“Jax,” she repeated, which was followed by more sobbing.

“Mom, is everything okay?”

Mom started crying hard, and I could hear her tears dripping 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,” Mom said through sobs. “He died this morning.”

“Mom, how’d it happen?” I asked, but I already knew. Dad couldn’t beat that cancer that gripped its black fingers around his 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,” he said.

“Thank you for being there, uncle.”

“When will you return?” Ron asked.

“I’ll come as soon as possible. Please take care of Mom. Then I’ll be there in no time.”

“I will.”

“Okay.”

“Okay.”

Then I hung up.

Brothers, no way I could 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 didn’t climb to the top of the hill, but today, I did climb the steps all the way to the top.

I sat on a bench atop the hill overlooking 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 and shouted obscenities to the heavens. Then the heavy tears flowed. The one day that I didn't want to happen had happened.

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 remember he would take me to the park on a Saturday afternoon after I watched cartoons all morning. We would grab our mitts and 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, we could play a friendly baseball game.

I remembered other nights when the burning smells and smoke would ascend from the kitchen and fill the whole house, triggering the smoke detector in the hallway as it buzzed angrily, letting everyone in the house know that an extra-crispy dinner was almost ready. My dad would come to my bedroom and sit on the edge of my bed. He always said, "Shhhh, let's 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. It was just an excuse to get out of the house.

We would go around the corner to McDonald's and grab a hamburger and French fries. He always said, "Don't tell your mother as we approached the house. Just take a couple of bites of your food and wash it down with water. Okay. Let's try to keep her happy."

My cell phone chirped, and 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 would invite her into my depressing world, but, unfortunately, I was 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 didn'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 pretended everything was okay. Eventually, everything would be fine once the memories faded and good thoughts started to creep back into my mind.

Perhaps I should have told Phaedra, but I didn't. Who knew one week away from her would drive a wedge between us? I felt we would not see each other again.

I returned to the dorm room around nine at night and ran into my roommate as he was leaving.

"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.'"

"I don't recognize you," the large guy said.

Drew pulled out a blue flyer that advertised the rush.

"So what. You guys look like dweebs."

"Look. We're rushes," I snapped. "Thus, we're here to rush, so Goddammit, 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 said because he knew I would throw punches to get that beer. He moved to the side and opened the door to the house.

Brothers, if I ever needed a beer, tonight was the night to flood some brain cells in alcohol.

"What has gotten into you?" Drew asked. "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, frat boy wannabe, frat boy

groupie, and so on. Finally, we received our red plastic cups and stood in the keg line.

I felt heaven's gates open 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.

"Alright, man," the keg guy said. 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 as I inhaled that second beer.

"Don't get plastered," Drew said. "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 hadn't eaten since my mom called this morning. The world started shaking and tilting under my feet, so I grabbed the door jamb 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 would like to ask you for a favor."

Drew looked away because he knew a sales pitch was coming. He turned to look at me and said, "Shoot."

"I needed to borrow a little bit for a bus ticket."

Drew looked away again as he said, "I wish I could help you, man, but I've tapped out myself." The bastard would not even look into my eyes.

I took another swig of my beer. "No problem. I'll find a way," I said, trying to hide my disappointment. I studied Drew when he

looked away because I knew he was a lying bastard. Yesterday, I saw the Western Union receipt in the wastebasket in the dorm room, where I knew momma had sent a little spending money for her boy.

Drew looked at me and then turned to look into the living room. “Hey, isn’t that your girl?” He blurted.

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.

“Did you invite her to the party?” Drew asked.

“Perhaps I told 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 realize the extent of her naughtiness.

When Phaedra 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.

“How are you?” I asked.

“Good,” Phaedra replied. “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 said as I slammed my beer and set the empty cup on one of the bookshelves attached to the wall.

I turned to look at Drew and said goodbye.

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, which 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 was watching TV in the community room or a movie in another dorm room.

I walked to the edge of town to the junkyard 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 saw one car with the hood open, the engine missing, and the driver's door propped open. I walked to it and pulled the lever to open the trunk. I saw only blackness, so I felt around in the trunk. Nope, it's 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. Then 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 crowbar, making sure to wipe my fingerprints off these burglary tools. Then, I assembled the jack and slipped it under the sliding door. I pumped the jack, applying immense pressure upward on the door as 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 hid behind the dumpster, crouching low and searching for nosy neighbors. 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 area to the swinging metal door that led into 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

deep shit if anyone was standing in the parking lot and was looking at the storefront. They could 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 pushed the crowbar between the wooden door and frame. 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, where 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 did not return 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 of the manager's desk. The safe was a cheap electronic 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 bounced it on top of the desk while simultaneously turning the safe's locking knob at the same time.

I bounced the safe again and tried to open it. 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 safe's knob at the same time. The safe popped open, and I removed all the money and checks and spread them on the table.

I removed the money and slipped it into my pocket. Once I got out of town, I had plenty of time to count it. Then, I stacked the checks, folded them, and slipped them into my other pocket.

I removed the picture frame from the wall that held the commemorative two-dollar bill, smashed the 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 genuinely random.

I jogged to the manager's door and peered out. There was no traffic, no people, but I heard a dog howling in the distance. I sprinted to the storage area 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, disassembled it slipped it with the crowbar into my backpack, and got the hell out of there.

I walked to the center of the blue suspension bridge and waited until there was no traffic. Then I dropped the jack and crowbar one by one into the river.

I caught the bus the following day and headed home.

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, whispering, "You came home." Then the tears flowed from her eyes again.

After my mom let me go, Uncle Ron shook my hand. "I'm glad to see you."

"I said I would come home, so here I am."

After we said hello, 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. Although the house was silent when my dad locked himself up in the room, the house seemed haunted after he was gone. The emptiness would drive me insane.

I knew 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, haunted. I excused myself and headed to my bedroom but stopped at the spare bedroom.

I turned the knob and walked into the spare bedroom where my stricken father hid away from the world. I wasn't 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. Dad's room was spotless, and the smell of potpourri filled the room like a field of flowers. As I walked around this room, only the trashcan indicated signs of my dad's existence. I saw the wastebasket filled with Snickers bar wrappers.

I sat down on the edge of his bed and 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 several times and caught it.

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 was near and was waiting for him to fall asleep.

I picked the top photo album, browsed through it, and 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 them dating. They looked so young and vibrant when they had the whole world in front of them. My parents had several pictures of them 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 about the first seven years of my life—my birthdays, Christmases, and Thanksgivings.

I picked up the third album; only half was filled with pictures. The older I got, the fewer pictures the family put into the album. Of course, that was when the cancer had 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 my 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, wedged the baseball into one of the mitts.

Walking to the door, I saw a Snickers bar on the dresser. I grabbed it, placed it on the mitt with the baseball, and headed to my room.

I locked my room, pulled the money and checks out from my backpack, and counted them – 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 financed my college education?”

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, opened every pocket, and dumped everything out. Nothing! I turned the backpack upside down and shook it. 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?”

“Okay, Mom,” I yelled. “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 headed downstairs to watch the news with mom and my uncle. We sat in silence.

We piled into my mom’s car while Uncle Ron drove us to the requiem on Saturday. We didn’t speak or listen to the radio as we went to the funeral parlor. I watched the scenery pass by as if 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 your dad would be proud of you, and so on.

I could only muster a thank you, but I didn't recall a single one of them ever coming to my 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, empty pockets, and piles of medical bills stacked on the kitchen counter near the telephone.

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 hadn't been to church in years, the minister was nice enough to come and read a eulogy.

I wasn't sure how, and when I came home, I just lay on my bed. Then my uncle came into my bedroom and sat on the corner of the bed, just like my dad used to do when dad needed that one-to-one communication.

"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?" I asked in a challenging voice.

"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 my uncle rose and left the room. He slowly closed the door so as not to make a sound.

Don’t get me wrong. I don’t mind staying and getting that job at the lumber store, but I didn’t feel right staying in this house. Although I lived here all my life, I thought I no longer belonged there. I felt like I was staying at a stranger’s house, and the welcome had disappeared.

I picked up my phone to check my messages. Nada. Phaedra didn’t bother to call or text. Well, nobody loves me up there at the university. I just shook my head.

I rose, showered, dressed, and packed my suitcases the following day 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 for a minute to let the board settle before continuing.

I left a note on the kitchen table – Mom, I’m 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 them on the table beside the note. I grabbed an empty coffee mug from the cupboard and put it on the money.

I walked out the front door. Reaching the street, I turned around and looked at the house where I no longer belonged anymore. Although I was born here, I was a stranger in a strange town. Then I headed to the bus station.

Chapter 12 – An Expensive Gift

Brothers, I returned to the depressing college town by nightfall feeling like someone took a pin and popped my balloon world. I called Phaedra several times, but the girl didn't return my phone calls. I knew she loved unique knickknacks, so I swallowed my pride and rode a broken-down city bus to get to the mall on the other side of town if you can call it a mall – a small collection of stores connected together by a covered walkway with 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.

“Do you need any help, sir?” The saleswoman asked.

“Yes, ma'am. 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. “Wow,” I whistled. “Why are the white rings much more expensive than the gold ones?”

“That's white gold.”

“Sounds cool.” Then I scratched my chin, 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,” I said. “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,” I said

sarcastically. “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, where 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. There is plenty of vintage stuff – old tea, coffee, cracker tin containers, stained coffee mugs and teacups, scratched silver trays, and so on. I shook my head. Phaedra drank plenty of tea and coffee, but I hadn’t seen her make any. She always drank the expensive stuff at the coffee shops, and she never reached her hands into her pockets to pay for anything.

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 hurried over to the following stack, browsed through the vintage music, and spotted names I didn’t recognize. I browsed through another stack – Pink Floyd, Styx, and Yes. I was about to leave when I spotted the small 45s – the little records with one song on each side – the kind my mom and dad grew up on. Of course, I always had to remember to change the speed on the record player – otherwise, the music came out slowly, as if the words were sung slower. Then I saw the name – Beatles printed on the sleeve with a picture of 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 is 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?” I asked.

“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’s 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 the 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 had to ask, “You really have a master’s degree in chemical engineering?”

The cashier nodded yes.

“And you work here?”

The cashier nodded yes again and added, “Proprietor.” Brothers, what could I say? I started 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-proprietor.

The proprietor placed the record on the desk and disassembled the picture frame. The cashier centered the album on the glass like a surgeon returning an organ to the patient. Then he covered the back with a black felt cloth and secured the back frame.

I gasped when he flipped the frame over. It looked beautiful, although no one would 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. “Thank you,” the proprietor said. “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 was, sitting 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.

The Dean looked up and noticed me. I looked down again, 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 it, 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. The Dean was such a bastard. He was 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 my burger with my other hand.

I looked at my tray, grabbed a French fry, dipped it into the ketchup pond, and plopped it into my mouth.

"Jax, I presumed."

I dropped my hands under the table and looked up, feigning surprise, and quickly chewed that French fry.

The Dean smiled.

"You presumed correctly," I answered as I swallowed my food.

"I hope you accept my apologies, young man. How do you say it? At the honor's banquet, we got off on the wrong proverbial foot the other night."

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 in agreement and rose to face the Dean like a gentleman.

"I am throwing a humble social gathering on Saturday for elite business students and professors. It would be my pleasure if you could 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 eventually win him over.

The next day, I met Phaedra at the small mall—the same one, brothers—where I splurged on my girl with that 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: gasoline sold for 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 in my wallet. Phaedra arrived fifteen minutes later and scooted in the booth across from me. “How are you?” I asked.

Phaedra 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 could I forget? It's not my favorite. I remember my mom always buying 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. Phaedra 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. “Really?” She blurted as she smiled.

“Of course. I think you’ll love it.”

I pulled out the picture frame with the Beatles’ album from the plastic bag and placed it right side up on the middle of the table. Phaedra’s 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 you should never take it out of its packaging. It’s a 1964 Capitol 45. *You 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. After 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. 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 return it and pull out something else.

A young salesgirl who was pleasing to the eyes walked over. “Can I help you?” She asked.

Phaedra turned towards the girl. “Can I try this on?”

“The dressing stalls are right over there,” the girl said as she pointed towards the back of the store.

“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. Then I indulged in a smartphone game or two as I waited.

Phaedra reappeared with the mound of clothes and dumped them onto the sales counter. “Thank you, but none of them fit,” she growled. 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 of 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?” I demanded.

She stopped and peered down. “I must have forgotten to take it off,” she said, smirking.

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.”

Phaedra released my hand and continued walking to her dark green Honda Accord. She placed the framed Beatles album into the trunk and entered the driver’s side. I ran to the car and jumped 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 were studying 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 if it thinks you are a criminal.”

Phaedra looked over and shrugged her shoulders. She started the car and headed towards campus. I opened the glove box and pulled out the leather case filled with music CDs. Then I spotted 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? We won one game, but I haven’t kept up with the home team.”

Phaedra frowned and looked over. “We won two games,” she snapped.

“Oh, I stand corrected. That should help our team get into the playoffs. That’s good. At least you’re 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 and arguments. Besides, I didn’t want to make her too angry because it would be a long walk to campus.

She parked the car near the business building. I looked at her, “Look, perhaps I have been too drastic. I just don’t like you shoplifting.”

Phaedra kept staring ahead as if she didn’t hear me.

“I will 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 head towards me and leaned over to kiss her lips. She turned her head again, and I kissed the hair on the back of her head. “Thanks for the ride,” I mumbled and climbed out of the car.

Brothers, what was I going to do with this woman? The next day, I returned to the mall, 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 didn't need to be. She could become the best attorney in the state, and, besides, if I get myself into some legal trouble, she could come to the rescue.

Chapter 13 – The Dean’s Dinner Party

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 hated to say it, and I despised 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, leaving the shirttails untucked and draped over my Levi blue jeans.

As I slapped on some fragrant cologne while staring at the mirror, I studied the face staring back at me. Then I nodded a badass greeting to myself. I whispered, “Who’s the man?”

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 saw many cars parked in a small neighborhood; the guests parked 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 said, “Hello, Jax. I had hoped you would have no trouble finding the house.”

“Thank you, sir.”

The Dean moved to the side and made a sweeping motion with his arm. “Please, come in,” he said, being the consummate hostess.

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,” he said, sweeping towards the long food table.

“Thank you,” I said. Looking around the kitchen, I 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 that I could extinguish 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 didn’t know

where to start, so I grabbed a plastic plate and a portion of everything, sampling everything as I made my way along the table.

The Dean patted me on the back, "Enjoy yourself." Then he returned to the living room.

An older student wearing a bow tie, wire-rimmed glasses, and sprouting a thin, spotty beard walked into the kitchen. "Hello. I see you found the food."

"Yeah, the food is 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 wastes no expense."

"Amen, brother."

The student approached and extended his hand for a handshake. "I apologize," he said. "But I haven't seen you around before. You must be a new honor student."

I shook his hand and replied, "Of course I am. I just started my first semester."

"My name's Mark."

"Hello, just call me Jax."

"You must be an outstanding 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 arms."

"Wow, you must've said some magical words. The Dean has spoken to me several times, and I'll graduate with top honors next semester."

"Well, you've just gotta penetrate his pompous exterior. And you never know," I whispered as I leaned closer. "He may even become my father-in-law."

Mark's eyes widened as he shook his head. "No way."

I grabbed a cup of iced 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 dance wildly on my taste buds.

“That dessert must be delicious, the way you scarfed it down.”

After licking my spoon clean, I replied, “The custard’s so creamy, so silky, I’ll probably have another two or three.”

“Besides, life can lead to some interesting things,” I said as I placed the empty wine glass on the table. 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. About ten minutes ago, I saw her go out the back with the hockey captain. 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?”

“Look, friend, you need to watch what you say,” I said as I felt molten lava pulsate through the veins of my face.

“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 headed to the swimming pool in the backyard.”

“I’ll prove to you that they’re just friends.”

“Sure, they’re great friends. I even saw a little smeared lipstick on the hockey captain’s cheek.”

I turned a dark crimson as the lava in my blood heated my face another thousand degrees. I would punch him in the nose if this dude kept talking like this.

Mark swallowed his food hard and almost choked. “Sorry. Perhaps that was the wrong couple,” he said as he tried to defuse the situation. He added, “Perhaps it was the other hockey captain of the team.”

“You said you saw them near the swimming pool. Right out there?” I asked as I pointed at the back door.

Marked nodded his head.

“Then I’ll go talk to her,” I said as I placed my plate on the counter’s edge and headed out the backdoor.

Numerous lanterns illuminated the backyard, and 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 Phaedra was in another man’s arms, so I stomped to the patio table.

My heart stopped for a second as I recognized Phaedra’s familiar shape as I approached. Brothers, what could I say? I clenched my hands into fists and came with five feet. “Hey, Phaedra, I left you alone for two minutes, and you’re already kissing another dude,” I said in the calmest voice that I could muster.

The two lovers jerked away from each other. Then Phaedra screamed. “Jax! What’re you doing here?”

“Your charming father invited me to the party.”

“Who’s the dweeb?” Steve blurted.

“Steve shut up,” I yelled.

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, too.”

“She’s not your girl,” Steve screamed as he stepped closer while Phaedra tried to push him back. “Phaedra, this guy needs to leave, so I’ll help you take out the trash,” Steve added.

“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.”

“Steve. Steve,” Phaedra screamed.

I turned and walked to the house. Mark stood near the counter where I had left him. When I entered the kitchen, he turned and quickly looked down at the counter again.

“Thanks for the information. I did find her.”

He looked at me. “I hope everything is okay,” he said.

“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.”

“That’s not the word around campus,” Mark said as he laughed.

I grabbed a new plastic plate and added a mound of food. “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 said as I carried my plate of food to the living room.

Dean Tremaine looked at me and then 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 said as I stomped to the front door while the Dean burst into pompous chuckles.

Everyone became quiet.

I opened the door and walked out. Of course, brothers, I gently closed the door behind me. What could I do? He was 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 thrown me out of the university. I would not give him the pleasure of signing my expulsion letter. Then I smiled. Then I remembered.

Perhaps I should kill the prick. That gun was still tucked in the suitcase in a white towel in the dorm room.

I wandered to the hillside park, 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 eating, I looked at the city sprawled out in front of me during twilight.

“Jax. Jax,” Phaedra said as she ran to me, panting. 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. But hey, at least my heart is still beating.”

“Jax, I tried 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.

“You must like riding around in his nice Mercedes,” I said.

“Jax, it was not 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. You just study, go to class, and drink beer with your loser friends.”

“Are you serious?”

“Well, Steve’s exciting.”

“I see. I didn’t realize Steve was so terrible. What makes that so exciting?”

Phaedra looked away.

“That’s the way it goes. Don’t worry about me,” I said.

“Like one night, we waited in his car. And...”

“Please tell,” I said, trying to coax more information from her.

“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.”

“Jax, you’re a nice guy. It’s just that 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, a little more adventurous. 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 accident.”

Phaedra looked at me again. “Don’t be angry with me.”

“I’m not. I’m more angry with myself.”

Phaedra left, and I remained sitting on the bench overlooking the city. All the signs were there. I knew I would lose Phaedra but refused to believe it.

Brothers, women can be so crazy. She went ape shit for a dude who stole a couple of bottles of booze from a store. I’d done stuff these last few months that would place me two decades behind bars. Then the corners of my eyes became watery.

I started to think about my dad. “I’m sorry, Dad,” I babbled. I know you wanted me to do something with my life. I know you would be disappointed in me because I became a dirtbag 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.”

Chapter 14 – The Attack of the Atomic Burritos

Brothers, I have never been so angry with a person in my life. I just wanted to grab the first stranger I saw by the throat and choke him to death. I should be furious with Steve because he could have any girl on campus, but he stepped into my world and stole my girl. However, 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 blinded me. 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, around 8:30 in the morning, I headed straight to the business building. 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 it.

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 at night. 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 unlocked. I scanned the area for any traffic. Satisfied no one was lurking around, I slipped on my gloves, grabbed the bottom of the window, and slid it up.

Once I pushed the window to the top, I climbed inside. Then I closed and locked the window.

I walked to the front of the Dean's office, spun around, and threw a backkick at the door. Bam! The doorframe around the doorknob exploded into a cloud of splinters, and the door slammed open and crashed 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 had no current battles waging against the hapless secretary of the Dean.

I approached the Dean's office and rammed my upper body into his 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 was not sure what happened, but I felt my insides turn to lava and gurgle through my bowels. I held my stomach to soothe those angry spasms, but it was too late. Those twelve atomic burritos 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 and splattered over Dean Tremaine's desk. I squatted for five minutes, letting the last bits of the burritos 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, folded and slid the board into it, and then 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, opened it a little, and peered out.

I didn't see anyone, so I pushed the door open and walked out into the cold night air, and the door automatically closed and locked behind me.

I returned to an empty dorm room. Thank God Drew was out. I headed to the bathroom, removed my clothes and soiled underwear, and carefully placed my underwear in the wastebasket at the bottom. 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 lay on my stomach on my bed, reading 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 another 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, mumbling, “How did you get that scholarship?” Then I fell asleep.

Early the following day, 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 headed downstairs to eat breakfast. Afterward, I walked to the student athletic center. I hid the whole backpack in the men’s locker room. I chose a locker in the last aisle, where few patrons ventured. Then, I snapped a brand-new padlock to protect those valuables.

I was ready to walk out. “Jax. Jax,” someone called.

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.

“Are you all set with the plans?” David asked.

“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 run into you at the gym.”

I noticed David was driving the car out of town. “By the way, where are we going?”

“It’s a surprise.”

“Isn’t the church back there?” I said as I pointed towards the back window.

“We’re not going to church today.”

“We’re not. Then where are 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’ are we going again?” I asked.

“We’re almost here,” he said. 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 met at the trunk. I looked at David’s face. Then I peered into the trunk. David opened a silver polymer case and revealed a handgun 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 said as he pulled out a clip 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 sidearm.”

“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 in surrender. “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 while David slammed the trunk, and we walked farther into the woods. “Could you place those cans over there on that tree trunk?” David asked as he pointed at the stump.

“Huh?” I gasped 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. You seem a little nervous.”

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 said as he placed his hand on mine 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,” I said in jest.

David laughed.

“Well, what if I shoot the Dean first and then the hockey captain?”

“I cannot condone the killing of an innocent person,” David said.

“Hey, wait a minute. You would like 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 mumbled.

“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 a poor choice in women. The devil’s women will lead righteous men astray.”

“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 was out of bullets, I could still hit him on the head with the damn thing if he kept on talking that way.

“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?” I asked.

David just stared at the road in front of him.

“Well, I guess the Lord does work in mysterious ways,” I added, and I just wanted to get out of that car and away from this Christian serial killer.

David dropped me off at the front of my dorm, and then he drove off.

Chapter 15 – A Good Day for an Ass Whipping

Brothers, I stayed away from people for several days. Sometimes, I felt good and forgot about my dead father, the devious Dean, and my two-timing ex-girlfriend. Other times, when I was smiling and enjoying the company of others, sad memories would creep back into my mind. Still, I presented a happy face to the world. Then, today, I just didn't feel well. I just wanted to avoid people.

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, made my regular stop at the Math-Sciences building, and dropped off 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 like the previous day's dish. It didn't matter if the cooks added noodles or rice or shook in some different seasonings. The food always tasted the same, and it was always bad.

I mumbled, "You guys are tired of the food, too. I don't blame you." I petted each one several times, turned to go, and wandered towards downtown. I walked past the Library Bar and Grill until I was on the street that followed along the river.

A white car screeched to a stop next to me. "That's him," the driver screamed. 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?" He yelled at me.

"One, two, three, four," I counted. "Looks like a fair fight."

"Yeah, it's fair. We're gonna 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.

"Really? Last time we talked about business, you went swimming. So, how was the swim?" I asked and started chuckling.

Steve's friend stood behind me and 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,” he screamed as he kicked me again.

“Yeah, I got it,” I mumbled.

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 couldn’t afford a trip to the hospital.

A red compact car approached and then stopped. An overweight woman rolled down the car window. “Shall I call an ambulance?” She asked.

Finding all my inner strength, I shooed with my hand. “Please don’t call an ambulance. I just tripped while jogging. I’ll be fine. Thank you for your concern.”

She looked up and down at me. “Okay then,” she replied. Then she rolled up her window and drove away.

Brothers, I wasn’t sure how, 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?” He asked.

“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 chatted with the hockey captain and three of his buddies.”

Drew pulled up the sleeves of his shirt. “Let’s get some friends together and go after them,” he said.

“No. Just let it go.”

“What? We can’t let them get away with this. We must hit hard and fast,” he screamed as he punched his fist into his open hand.

“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, all right. I have a plan.”

“Then how can I help?”

“Well, I feel like shit. Do you have any aspirin? Or something stronger?”

Drew walked to his desk, 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. “Thanks, man,” I said as I limped to the bathroom. Reaching the sink took me an eternity, but I tossed the two tablets into my mouth. Then I turned on the 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. At the same time, the steamy hot water massaged my body. I still hurt, but the hot water helped dull the pain.

I dried myself and wrapped a towel around my waist. I peered in the mirror at the wreckage of my face – one black eye and several dark bruises on one side of my cheek while the other side had swollen twice the normal size with a gash across it. I returned to my bed to lie down.

Drew asked, “How’d you feel.”

“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.”

“That’s Phaedra’s new boyfriend,” I said as I looked down.

“What? Oh, I’m sorry, dude. I thought that it was odd that she isn’t around anymore.”

“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,” Drew said, starting to laugh uncontrollably. “But, dude, we still must teach them a lesson.”

“I know. I have a plan,” I said.

“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 began 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?”

“Ah, I feel much better,” I lied. Then I fell asleep and woke around five o’clock in the morning. As I slid out of bed, my ribs hurt when I moved. My black eye darkened while my face was still swollen. But I felt a little better. I looked over at Drew and saw he was still sleeping.

I dressed, grabbed breakfast at the cafeteria, and limped to the athletic department. I grabbed my backpack with the commemorative two-dollar bill, the stolen grocery store checks, the Dean’s antique chess set, and a gun.

I walked to the block of fraternity houses. I hadn’t realized it until now, but Steve’s fraternity was next to my little church. I looked around. Nothing moved near the campus. I approached a car in the parking lot and looked around again. I went to the driver’s side and opened the door. And, brothers, that’s the one good thing about small college towns. Nobody locks their homes and cars. I pressed a button, and the trunk popped open.

I slid along the car, opened the trunk, 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.

Chapter 16 – Some Idle Threats and Tasty Cornbread

Brothers, I jumped up and rubbed my eyes as someone stood outside and pounded on my door. “Open up, now!” A loud voice screamed.

“What the fuck?” Drew yelled as he jumped up from his sleep.

My right eye flared up in pain as I accidentally rubbed my black eye. Drew jumped out of bed and ran to the door as the pounding continued.

“Guys, what the fuck? We’re sleeping,” Drew yelled as he opened the door.

“Campus security.”

“Oh.”

“Are you Jax Gamble?”

“Ah, ah, no. He’s over there,” Drew said as he pointed at me.

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 said as I swung out of bed and started putting on clean clothes from the closet. I walked by a pale white Drew, who looked at me wide-eyed.

The security guards escorted me on both sides. As we walked 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 put the car into drive.

The guard parked at the fire hydrant behind the Business Building. Then they escorted me to Dean Tremaine’s Office.

I glanced at the damage I did to both doors as I entered the Dean’s office. The Dean sat at his desk and looked up as we entered.

“Sit,” one guard snapped as he pulled out a chair.

“Thank you, gentlemen,” the Dean said. The guards left the office, and I looked at the Dean while he glared at me.

“I shall only ask you once,” the Dean said as he looked coldly at me. “Did you break into my office last weekend?”

“No,” I uttered as I shook my head.

“May I enquire about your whereabouts this past weekend?”

“You mean the whole weekend?”

“Yes, the whole weekend,” the Dean snapped.

“Let me see. I’ve been to 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,” the Dean said as his grin widened.

“Thank you, sir. I know you would like to help.”

“Do you possess my antique chess set or know who may have mistakenly taken it?”

“Nope,” I said as I shrugged my shoulders. “I don’t have your chess set. Sir, I don’t even play chess.”

“We are 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 said, glaring at me.

“Really? What kind of biological sample?” I asked. Then I looked at the desk’s surface where I took a dump, and that must’ve been some radioactive burritos because my wastes had eaten some of the finish from his desk.

“By next week, we shall determine the culprit’s identity?”

Brothers, I will admit. The Dean’s statement frazzled me a little because a DNA test had not occurred. Could scientists extract DNA from feces, I thought?

“Do you grant the police permission to collect your DNA sample?”

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

said as I rolled up my sleeve. “They can try to take blood from my arm if they like, 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 your criminal record follows you for the rest of your life. 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 may be able 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 would 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 mischief.”

Brothers, I was scared. I looked down at my trembling arms and crossed them in front of me. I told myself not to show fear in front of adversity. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. If you would like to expel me, go ahead and expel me. But I’ll hire an attorney and sue the university.”

The Dean continued glaring at me.

“Lawsuits can create bad publicity for the university,” I said. “Bad publicity could harm the 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. “That must have been one heck of a tumble during jogging,” he said as 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 discover who vandalized my office and stole my prized chess set. Do you understand me?”

“Good luck with your investigation,” I said as I rose and left the Dean’s office. As I was leaving, one of the guards snapped, “Jax Gamble, come with us.”

“Gentlemen, where are 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?”

“You’ll get all the sausage McMuffin in the showers at the Hudson State Correctional Facility,” one guard said as he looked at me. Then 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 Campus Security’s headquarters, hidden on the other side of campus near the warehouses.

The guards led me into their office, where we sat at an ancient wooden table and old wooden chairs that the university probably found in a landfill.

“Would you like some coffee?” One guard asked.

“Sure, why not.”

The guard placed a Styrofoam cup of coffee in front of me, and I took a sip and winced. “Do you have a license to sell that stuff?” I asked. “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 to his chair, went to his desk, and browsed through some papers. Then he returned to the table, 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 sipped 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 in 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,” I said as I chuckled.

“Defacing state property. Failing to comply with a police investigation,” the guard said as his complexion reddened.

“I am not trying to sound rude, but you are not real police officers.”

“Well, smart guy,” the guard replied and then grinned. “You don’t know much about state law. We’re certified by the state as police officers.”

“What? I didn’t realize that. May I ask why a university needs 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,” the guard snapped.

“I didn’t realize the university had such a crime problem that it necessitated 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.

“Where’s my attorney. You also didn’t read my Miranda rights?”

“Miranda, who?” The guard said as he started 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, retrieved a plastic bag, and pulled out a cotton swab. “Open your mouth,” he said as he shoved the cotton swab in my mouth and swirled it around.

Brothers, I would 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. Damn, those atomic burritos!

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,” he screamed.

I read the document this time as I was signing the form. “Oh yeah. The Dean said something about a biological sample. What was the nature of the sample?” I asked.

“We’re not at liberty to say.”

The guard placed the DNA kit on his desk and sat at the table again 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 between forty and seventy percent accurate.”

“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 would lie to suspects if they thought it would strengthen their case. That was the technique of interrogation – just get the defendant to talk. It didn’t matter what the defendant had said. The police recorded everything accurately and scrutinized every word the defendant had uttered. If the police found one discrepancy, never mind how small or insignificant that discrepancy was enough to charge the defendant with perjury. But if the police lied, that was okay. They were doing their job, protecting the public from the criminals.

“Do you consent to a polygraph test?” the guard asked.

I looked down at the table and shut my mouth while the guard studied me. I stopped talking and looked at each other for about thirty minutes. Then the other guard returned. The guard who was with me asked, “Did you find any evidence?”

“Nope. He’s clean.”

“I want to leave,” I said.

“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 for you 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 said as I got up to walk to the dorm. As I entered the familiar halls of the dormitory, students looked away

when they saw me approaching. When I had passed them, they would turn to stare at me from behind, like a crazed lunatic who escaped from the looney bin.

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?” Drew asked.

I looked around. Every drawer was pulled open, and its contents were tossed and dumped onto the floor, along with all the stuff in the closet. “Thanks for your concern about my safety,” I said.

“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. “So, what was stolen?” he asked.

“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 away and slammed the door shut. Brothers, who could blame Drew? He left for lunch and left me behind to clean up this mess. He was probably worried that he would also be on the Dean’s shit list, guilty by association.

I pulled out my cell phone and surfed the internet for answers to 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 law violations.

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 spotless dorm 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 a routine at the dorm. The Dean didn’t report the break-in to the police or upper management because the incident would bruise his inflated ego. 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 didn’t have to worry about scientists at the state capital analyzing my feces for evidence. Hopefully, the state had more severe crimes to investigate.

Brothers, I needed to do some good deeds this week – you know, help cancel out the bad stuff I did last week, so I volunteered at the 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 hall 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 cornbread to the side and passed the plate to open hands.

We served the homeless for over an hour. I took my lunch break, 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 homeless guy while Phaedra ran into the kitchen.

“Hey, that’s not fair,” a homeless patron said.

“What’s not fair?” I asked as I looked at him.

“You got four pieces of cornbread.”

“I work here, so I’m allowed extra portions.”

“That’s not fair?”

I picked up my fork, 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 attend that fancy college.”

“What does college have to do with fairness or my cornbread?”

“You think you’re better than us.”

I sighed. Then I pushed my plate towards him and turned it so the pyramid of cornbread was closest to him. “Help yourself, then,” I said.

The homeless guy smiled. He pulled out a plastic bag, 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 said as I slid my plate towards me and started eating my noodles and gravy.

“You work here. You can always get more. You’re entitled to it.”

While Phaedra returned, I returned to the buffet line and grabbed a slice of cornbread from a large cookie sheet.

“Jax, I need to speak to you?” Phaedra asked.

“I don’t know. I do not like the tone of your voice. Plus, I’m trying to enjoy my cornbread.”

“It’s important.”

I bit into my cornbread, chewed, and swallowed. “Okay, go ahead,” I said as I kept nibbling on that cornbread, looking down at the ground.

“Did you steal Daddy’s chess set from his office?”

I looked Phaedra straight into her eyes and lied. “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.

“Yeah, 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. Culprits will be found.”

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 out and left me alone to clean the whole dining room. So, I took my time and cleaned everything until it sparkled. Hey, life was good when I was still a free man.

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, piled them on a napkin, and slipped them into my jacket pocket. I would eat these on my long walk back to campus.

Chapter 17 – Almost Apprehended

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 had already investigated me and searched my dorm room. At the same time, Dean Tremaine hadn't found a way to touch me, or at least he hadn't. Then I could retire in style. Every criminal dreamt they'd 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 previous score wouldn't include a trip to a tropical island or frolicking with dancing girls at the nightclub. However, a tuition bill still loomed over my head for the next semester. Then I could find a job next summer.

I knew Phaedra watched her neighbor's home from time to time when he left 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. During the night, I could 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 knew? Perhaps I was stalking her a little, or I was waiting to catch Steve at the right time so I could finish our conversation.

Over 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 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.

I wore the usual old clothes—washed-out, torn blue jeans, a faded T-shirt, a black jacket, and a knit woven hat. I will throw away all the clothes 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. The Dean and Misses were probably having dinner somewhere in our small, quaint town.

I walked to the edge of the neighbor's driveway and looked both ways. A lonely dog barked in the 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, peered through the window, and saw a blank space where the owner would park his 2005 Cadillac Deville. "Great. He's gone," I mumbled. I have the whole house to myself."

I jogged to the back of the house while 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 was plugged into the wall. I smiled. The owner had plugged the light into an electric motion detector. I wondered how many burglaries that cheap device had foiled.

I returned to the back 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 while the glass broke and fell inside as the doormat muffled the crash of broken glass.

Although I could have used the key hidden under the flower pot next to the door, only an insider would know where the key was. I had to make the job look random.

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 drywall 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 thud.

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 gaping hole large enough for my hand to fit in, I began pulling out papers and documents and placing them on 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 said as 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 of the house and into the front porch. I jiggled the doorknob, but it wouldn’t unlock. Then I looked at the door, where 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, and the owner opened the back door and screamed, “If you’re 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,” he screamed.

Brothers, I didn’t know if it was my imagination or if the cold air and adrenaline amplified the sound. Still, I heard the distinct click of a gun as someone pulled the hammer back to place a bullet in the chamber. I jumped up and bolted through the owner’s bushes. A bullet screamed 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 noontime. 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 yelled.

I ran down the stairs.

Above me, a voice screamed. “Hey, you. Stop, or I’ll shoot.” Another bullet whizzed by and ricocheted off the stone wall as

another explosion filled the neighborhood again. In the distance, I heard police sirens coming from multiple directions.

I approached the street and looked at the suspension bridge before 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 across the street until I reached the edge of the 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. "He's over there," the Buick driver yelled as he pointed in my direction.

I ran through the trees until I reached the river. "Oh fuck. What do I do now?" I mumbled.

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 had come. It was now or never. I ran into the river while dragging a large branch. Fudge sickle, the river's freezing! Once I made it waist-high, I crawled onto the branch and started paddling. My body shook and shivered from the freezing waters. Damn, I was going to freeze to death.

"This is your last warning. Come out with your hands up," the police said through a bullhorn.

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 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," a policeman yelled.

The river's current carried me under the bridge. I saw a small log caught on the side of the bridge. I grabbed the log. Brothers, I

was shivering so badly that I thought icicles crystallized 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 underwater. I didn't 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 almost swam down and joined him, but a pain shot through my body, and I lurched above the water's surface, gasping for air. I looked into the waters below me but only saw blackness. My dad was gone.

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, my shoes sloshed while my jeans squeaked. Once I made it to the trees, they protected me from the freezing wind.

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 leading 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 drove slowly along the road as the cop on the passenger side guided 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 followed the city's outer perimeter toward the university. Then I heard a pack of barking dogs in the distance. I kept walking. Although I was still wet, the walking barely kept me warm.

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 reached the campus's edge. Lo 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 sat on the log, 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," I whispered. Then, I waited until the student athletic center opened.

I spotted some students walking to the athletic center and entering the building.

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 without 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 said.

"I'm sorry, but I can't let you in."

"Please don't make me return 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. I actually go to school here."

“Okay. I’ll let you in just this time,” she said as she looked at my key. Then she noticed my damp clothes.

I made the motion as if I were jogging in place. “Just a little morning run before class,” I said.

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 police chief. 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 works with a gang?”

“We’re investigating all possibilities. We’ll know more once we find the body. The police dive team is combing the waters.”

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“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 hope so, too,” the girl answered.

I headed to the men’s locker room, where 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 quickly 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 the cardboard pucks they called sausage. I just couldn’t get enough as I shoveled the food into my mouth by the truckloads. My body temperature also kept rising as my body devoured that energy food.

Drew spotted me and sat across from me. “Dude, what happened to you last night?” Drew asked with wide eyes.

“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 there last night.”

“I’ve been there. I know.”

“I met one last night. I think her name was Debbie or Dawn or something. Who the hell knows?”

“Dude, you can’t even remember her name,” Drew said as he laughed.

“After some serious drinking –“

“Yeah, yeah, go on.”

“We went 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.”

“So, what happened to your clothes?” Drew asked as he studied my 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, “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. How could I not hear 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 some financial aid money.”

Brothers, I still haven’t replaced my cell phone. Of course, I wasn’t expecting any calls from anyone anyway, so why 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 didn’t expect to win. I didn’t even buy lottery tickets anyway. They’re a waste of money.

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 jeans’ pocket, and it went through the washing machine,” I said, but I didn’t feel good lying to my mom, so 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 police apprehension. Now, Mom, because of me, everyone locked 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 with my first semester of college, and my final exams start in two weeks.”

“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. Okay.”

“I love you, Jax.”

“Love you, Mom.”

Brothers, I didn’t think I would return home for Christmas. I knew my mom needed me, but I 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, and I probably would not have the freedom to go anywhere, anyway. My days were numbered in Michigan.

Chapter 18 – It Was a Good Day for a Riot

Brothers, I couldn't believe it. It was two weeks since my failed break-in, and every time I heard a slamming door echo in the dorm's corridors, I jumped. 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 dull, 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, where 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.

"I can't believe the university will raise tuition next year," a student at the following table shouted. Then he pounded his fists onto the table. "Damn, those greedy bastards," he screamed.

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 hear you, brothers," I screamed. "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 agree," I said as I stood on my chair and addressed the crowd. "We must do something. I'm a reporter for the university newspaper, and those bastards in the administration made me publish a false news story that stated students were ecstatic about next year's tuition hike," I screamed as I scanned the crowd. "And let me tell you, most students, including me, are furious about next year's tuition hike."

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?” I yelled in his direction. “Are you happy with the tuition hike?”

“Hell no,” he yelled.

I pointed at another, “What about you? Are you happy?”

“No. I can’t afford it,” she yelled.

Then I pointed at another to my right, “What about you?”

“Fuck no. I’ve paid enough,” a student screamed.

“I’m with you. I’m tired, too, of feeding 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 administration cannot silence us. They can’t plant fake stories in the newspaper. They can’t bully us into forcing us to pay more. We must fight for what we believe in. We must stand against the administration.”

“So who’s with me?” I screamed as I stepped onto the table.

Many from the crowd yelled, “We are.”

I pointed at a person behind me, “Are you with us?”

“Hell yeah,” he yelled.

I pointed at another, “What about you. Will you stand with us and fight this corrupt administration?”

“Yes. Until the end,” she screamed.

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 buddy, 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. 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. When we approached the business building, the crowd had 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 in

a row on the other side. Dean Tremaine stood behind the guards with a worried look on his face.

I turned to look at 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 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 remarkable as I looked at the surging, angry crowds. Within fifteen minutes, the whole student body stood in unison against the university, and I stood at the front, the catalyst of this event.

I continued, “Those administrators made me publish 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. Still, they sit in fancy offices, earn humongous salaries, and drink gourmet coffees. They prop their feet onto their desks and laugh at us. They think we are weak, gullible students who will do anything to get that diploma. When a student comes in need and asks for help, the administrator invents a rule to shoo the student away.”

“Think about this for a second,” I screamed as I tapped the side of my forehead with my index finger. “The university cannot control its spending. We know how much we pay but don’t know where the money goes. The university is as transparent as a barrel of turds. The administration uses convoluted logic. For example, suppose the university raises tuition and increases the scholarships by the same amount. How could the university gain anything? However, the university did not publish the scholarships it would offer. The university must offer fewer scholarships to squeeze more money from us. It’s just a politician’s empty promise. A façade. So what do we tell those greedy administrators?”

“No tuition hike!” The crowd shouted.

“I don’t think they heard you. Tell them again what you think about next year’s tuition hike?”

“No tuition hike!” The crowd shouted louder.

The police parked five squad cars with flashing red and blue lights on the crowd’s edge. Then cops lined up looking in my direction, the source of the problem.

The Channel 5 News van pulled to the crowd’s edge ten minutes later.

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. “No tuition hike,” we shouted as we pumped our right fists up and down in unison.

“No tuition hike,” we kept chanting.

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.”

“Booooooooo,” the crowds hissed 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?” I screamed.

“No tuition hike. No tuition hike...” the students screamed. The crowds continued to swell. When I looked out to the crowd, I saw 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 came to taste a little of college.

Brothers, we were all frustrated, furious, and united. Those bastards in the administration drove us to our breaking point, and on several occasions, it looked like things would turn ugly. Several troublemakers hurled rocks at the police officers and police cars, while others tipped over trashcans and lit the trash on fire.

Finally, Dean Tremaine appeared on the other side of the glass doors of the business building. “Boooooooo,” the crowds hissed. 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 on 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 were sitting on a mountain of dynamite, but once the Dean had uttered his words, that anger and frustration disappeared. Students began dispersing. The protest had ended because they believed the administration. The administration would not raise tuition next year.

I started to walk down the steps, but five police officers surrounded me. “Is there a problem, officers?” I asked.

“You’re under arrest.”

“May I ask why?” I asked, but 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?’ I asked.

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 would scamper back to their pathetic little lives, live in their small worlds like gerbils in a cage, and act as if nothing had happened. If one student, such as myself, just disappeared, oh well. The students got what they wanted. Only one sacrifice was made. I was the sacrifice.

The police slid me into the squad car’s back seat and slammed the door shut. Two officers sat in the front, while one sat next to me in the back.

“Do we have time to get some donuts and coffee?” I asked. “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 snapped. “Wait until we get you to the station; that’s where your donut awaits you.”

“Great, could I request a Bavarian cream-filled?”

“Sorry, kid. We only offer black and blue dowsed in pain,” one of the cops said. I swallowed a dry lump. Of course, these guys planned to beat me.

Of course, we students should have known better because the board of trustees were 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 had lost. That rage and frustration hadn’t returned, or at least not during my stint at the university.

Chapter 19 – Prison, Here I Come

Brothers, here I sat handcuffed to a chair in the interrogation room. I had no idea how long I was 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 wounds 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 knew. They wouldn't try to coerce my confession if they had anything on me.

Two officers burst through the door. One officer looked like a nice guy, like the twin brother of my pastor at my church. The other looked like he should be locked up in a cage with wild grizzly bears at the zoo.

They always started out nice and acted like my best friends trying to help me. Then it turned ugly when I didn't give them what they wanted.

"We've had a rash of break-ins in our town?" The mean-looking officer said. "Someone broke into Mike's Garage and stole five thousand dollars. Would you happen to know anything about this?"

Those words, five thousand dollars, echoed through my mind. Wow, brothers, the whole world was brimming with thieves. I knew I had stolen about two thousand, but the owner of Mike's Garage stole money from the insurance company. "I don't know anything about this?" I replied. Yeah, I knew I had lied.

"Where were you on September 22, 2007?" the officer screamed.

"How would I know?" I answered, and then I laughed. "Where were you on September 10, 2006?" I asked.

"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 break-in, didn't you?"

“Of course, I’ve heard of them. I do read the newspapers. I even wrote one story for the university newspaper.”

“Where were you on the night of the burglary?”

“I’d probably drink with my roommate, watch a movie in the dorm, or study in the library.”

“Do you know anything about the burglary at the Library?”

“Library burglary? You mean someone stole some books from the library?”

“Just keep it up, wise-ass,” the friendly officer snapped as he slapped me hard. I can’t believe he struck me. Calm yourself. I would be already on a bus to the penitentiary if they had any evidence.

The mean officer continued, “No, the Library Bar and Grill. What do you think we were talking about?”

“The library with books, of course.”

“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 could prove my whereabouts to the police 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.

“Let me guess,” the mean-looking officer said. “You don’t know anything about the break-in at the house in Canyon Ridge?”

“Where’s Canyon Ridge.”

“On the other side of town. Next to your girlfriend’s house,” the nice-looking officer screamed as he slapped me in the back of the head again.

“Girlfriend?” I asked, dumbfounded. “I don’t have a girlfriend,” I replied.

The officers laughed while 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.”

“You know, you can get ten years for breaking into a business,” the nice-looking officer said. “Ah, but breaking into a residence. That’s twenty years. Mandatory. You’ll be someone’s bitch within a week.”

“I don’t know anything about it.”

“Mr. Stryker is standing behind that glass,” the mean-looking officer said as he pointed at the opaque window. “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,” I said confidently.

The nice-looking officer reddened while his mouth trembled. He turned his back to me and clenched and unclenched his fists several times again. The slapping ended, but his knuckles would take over for a while, like using a mallet to soften a tough tenderloin.

The friendly officer continued, “Then you would not happen to know anything about the armed robbery of the bursar’s office?”

“What? The bursar’s office?” I asked. This was entirely new for me as 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,” I said, and I wasn’t lying this time. At least, I know I didn’t do one thing.

“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. I don’t know who robbed the bursar’s office.”

“If you cooperate and give up your buddies’ names, we can talk to the judge,” the mean-looking cop said. “The judge could reduce your sentence for cooperating with the authorities.”

“You’re looking at a minimum of 20 years in prison for these crimes,” the nice-looking cop added. “But if you cooperate, you probably get twenty years, reduced to ten for good behavior.”

The cops jostled each other playfully. “Wait until he stands in front of Penitentiary Pete,” the mean-looking officer said to the nice-looking officer.

“Who?” I said.

“The judge, Penitentiary Pete,” the mean-looking officer snapped. “Everybody calls the judge whom you will be standing in front of. He sends everyone to prison.”

Oh, brothers, sweat stung my eyes. I bent my head and wiped my left eye on my left shoulder. Then I turned my head and rubbed my right eye on the other shoulder.

“I don’t think he’s hearing us,” the mean-looking officer said.

“Who are your accomplices in the bursar robbery?” The nice-looking officer screamed.

“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. Besides, the university has been robbing me all semester. Why don’t you go and arrest Dean Tremaine?”

“I think the kid’s playing stupid,” the mean-looking officer said. Bam, as my head jerked to the side after the nice-looking officer punched me hard.

“That’s a violation of my civil rights—“

Snap. My head jerked to the other side.

“You have no rights. Where’s the money?” The mean officer screamed.

“I. I didn’t steal any money.” Oh, corrupt cops. Jerkinheads. “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 rattled 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,” I screamed, and then I spat blood on the floor.

“What’s your HIV status?” the nice-looking officer asked.

“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. I could be a walking petri dish with various viruses and microorganisms living inside me.”

Bam. My head jerked to the left again.

“If you guys stop hitting me, you wouldn’t need to worry about my HIV status,” I screamed.

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 left a trail of blood and fluids on the floor that marked my path. No way in hell was I going to clean my body fluids off the floor.

I just lay there for several hours while I felt my face pulsate and throb with heat and pain. Brothers, I would instead meet Steve and his buddies again. Their beating paled in comparison.

I had 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 soothe the throbbing. Then, I collapsed in the center of the cell while lying on my back.

When I awakened again, I glanced at the concrete bench and saw three tough-looking thugs huddled together. I turned my head to the other side of the jail cell 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 spoke politely. I can be a little clumsy.”

“You must have 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?” I asked.

“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. Don’t get me wrong; I wished I had done it to steal from those thieving bastards.”

“Yeah, right.”

“Sweet, man,” the college kid said.

The pack leader said, “Nobody was talking to you.”

I rolled to my side and propped myself up into a sitting position. Then I slid towards the wall between the thugs and college students.

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 rose slowly.

I interjected and defused the situation. “Guys, come on. We’re here together. Let’s not fight each other. We should be fighting the corrupt system 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 because I refused to confess to crimes I didn’t do, so they beat the shit out of me. They tried to beat a confession out of me,” I said as I pointed to my face for emphasis. “We should stand together. It’s us against them.”

Everyone in the cell sat down again. It was a while before anyone talked.

I slid down the wall until I was lying on the concrete floor again and fell asleep.

I woke up as an officer pounded on the metal door with his nightstick. "Rise and shine, dirtbag," he shouted.

I rubbed my eyes with my hands. Then I scanned the cell. It was empty again except for 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 of the bathroom sink.

I slowly rose to my feet. I felt every muscle, every joint in my body ached. The officers helped me walk 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 let the morning sun in.

Phaedra jumped out of her chair as I walked in, ran to me, and hugged me. She leaned back while still holding my waist with her hands. "Jax, what happened to you?" She asked.

"Oh, nothing. I must have rolled off the bed in the cell and fallen 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 gave

me permanent heart damage. 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. I could visualize a team of cops standing on the other side, listening and recording everything Phaedra and I said. The police hoped an old flame would make me squeal like a rusty electric fan.

“Phaedra, believe me when I tell you this. I had nothing to do with the university robbery.”

“Then somebody broke into my daddy’s office and stole his antique chess set.”

“I know. I heard about it.”

“Daddy thinks you did it?”

“I didn’t do that one either,” I said, looking into her eyes without blinking. Come on; I had to lie and give a great performance. “Your dad has many people angry with him. I think every student came to the protest except for you.”

“I was there.”

“Really? I didn’t see you there.”

“By the tree, next to the ROTC Building.”

“That’s cool. 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?” I asked.

Phaedra looked down and shrugged her shoulders.

“I understand. You must think about your future.”

“I’m sorry, Jax,” she said.

“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 and asked, “You’re not angry with me?”

“Of course not. Let’s go our separate ways. We shared some good memories and 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.

“Do you really want to be friends?” Phaedra asked.

“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 okay. I’m sure the police will catch the town burglars and the university robbers. And your dad will find the bastard who broke into his office. And just in case you don’t see me again, please let my mom know what happened to me.”

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-shaped 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 was one lucky guy.

She kissed me on the cheek, and then she looked at me. “Let’s meet for coffee when you get out,” she said.

“That sounds like a plan. We can meet when exams are over.”

“I may not be in town after exams,” Phaedra said as she turned reddish.

“Wow. Where are you and Steve going for Christmas?”

“Not with Steve. Daddy’s taking 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 I need nothing 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, and I shook my

head back and forth in disbelief. Why did she steal my lucky talisman? That bitch.

After I sat an eternity in the holding cell, the police opened a large metal door. They 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 trailed from behind. We marched along an underground tunnel from the police jail to the courthouse lockup.

Brothers, I was tired of counting the same bricks repeatedly 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? Were the police storing us in a meat locker? I hadn'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 didn't sit down at the window to confer with anyone. I just sat in the corner and kept to myself.

“What's the date?” I asked the person next to me.

“Monday.”

“No, I mean the date on the calendar.”

The guy shrugged his shoulders.

Another inmate was sitting across from me, “The fifth.”

“Thanks.”

Shit, I thought to myself. I was only locked up for the weekend, which felt like an eternity. I would go completely mad to sit in prison for a decade or two.

Around noon, or at least what I thought was noon, a police officer handed out brown paper bags for lunch. I eagerly grabbed mine, sat down, and tore the bag open—a bologna sandwich, a packet of crackers, an apple, and a box of juice.

“Not this shit again,” one inmate said as he tossed his bag onto the floor.

“What ya talking about? You should see the shit they feed us in the college cafeteria,” I said. Then I took a large bite of my sandwich and chewed it like I savored a USDA prime cut steak.

Everyone in the cell turned and stared at me. “Are you serious?” Someone asked.

“Yeah. Sometimes, I went to the homeless shelter where I could get much better food.”

“Unbelievable,” another inmate uttered.

After lunch, inmates started disappearing one by one. Finally, I was the last inmate in the cell. I stumbled to the payphone and dialed zero.

“Which number would you like to call?” The operator said.

“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 is 880 VKE,” I said, then hung up.

After an hour, the bailiff opened the door and escorted me to the courtroom, where I stood on the left side while the prosecutor stood on the right.

“Your honor, this is the last case on the docket – a writ of habeas corpus,” the court clerk said.

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.”

“Your honor,” the prosecutor started. “Jax Gamble represents a threat to our society. He orchestrated a protest to hide a robbery of the university bursar’s office. We must detain Jax Gamble for another week as the police complete their investigation.”

“Your honor, this is how the police conduct an investigation,” I said, pointing at my face.

“Objection, objection,” the prosecutor repeated.

The judge looked at me, then 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.

“Your honor, the police are -“ I said, pointing to my face.

“Objection, your honor,” the prosecutor shouted.

The judge asked the prosecutor, “Do you have enough evidence to charge the defendant?”

“Not at this time, your honor. We’re still collecting critical evidence.”

“I uphold the writ and order the defendant released,” the judge replied. Then the judge signed a document, stood up, and entered the chambers behind him.

The prosecutor faced me and squinted his eyes. “You think you won this round. But we’ll get you,” he said. Then he stomped out of the court.

Brothers, I was ecstatic 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 told him to pay my fine. But damn, that fine was much better than the twenty years for burglary and armed robbery.

Brothers, I didn't know it then, 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 a 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 believed David thought I was a putz and would become the fall guy for his misdeeds. I felt I wasn't the obedient, mindless Christian soldier whom David thought I was.

So, brothers, I foiled my nemesis's assassination; the Dean and the prick didn't even know about it, but that was okay, though. Although I hated the bastard, I didn't think he deserved to die. Perhaps fired and left homeless on the street, but not dead. Ultimately, the Board of Trustees demoted the Dean, so he returned to teaching as a regular professor, stripped of his dignity, authority, and title.

I occasionally passed Professor Tremaine in the corridors but was afraid to enroll in 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. Haha, you motherfucker!

Chapter 20 – An Honest Living for a Change

Brothers, the police came to my jail cell early in the morning and released me. No apologies. No one wished me good luck with my future. No one said to be good and don't come back. The pricks didn't even serve me breakfast. They just handed me 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, not high enough to hang out in Dean Tremaine's circle, or at least former circle since the board demoted him. Sometimes, I felt sorry for the pompous prick. At one moment, the board groomed him to take the position of the university president. Who knew, perhaps, that he would become a future state leader. Now, he only taught a class or two every semester, a has-been roaming the halls in the business building.

After completing my final exams that Friday, I tied one on at a Delta party.

"Dude, I can't believe you were arrested," Drew said, and then he gulped his beer down.

I took a swig of the beer in my plastic cup. "What can I say? I was wrongfully arrested. Wrongfully accused. Wrongfully beaten up by the police."

"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. "My bad, here's your money," I said. "So, we're even."

"Thanks, dude."

"I always pay my debt."

"Dude, everyone thought you were the master cat burglar," Drew said as he sipped his beer. "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 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 were members of the same church and 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 couldn’t tell about people from their looks, could you? People present one face to the world, and then they turn around and commit some real wicked shit in dark alleys.”

Drew gave me a strange look. “Yeah, you’re right. You can never tell about a person,” he said as he eyed me suspiciously.

We heard a commotion as a crowd gathered around the aluminum beer keg in the living room.

“A keg stand. Do you wanna try?” I said and pointed.

“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 an upward 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 into my esophagus like an express train. The crowd began cheering, “Go. Go Go Go...” while the beer gushed through into my mouth and rushed to 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 individually. As I stood on my feet, the world wobbled a little and swirled around. 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 our 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 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 it. Just like our tuition bills.”

After some serious drinking, Drew and I stumbled towards our dorm room. About halfway 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 burglar, weren’t you?” He asked as he looked me in the eyes.

“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.”

“What difference does that make?” I replied as I looked to the ground.

“It makes a huge difference.”

“Okay, let’s entertain your idea for a second. What if I were the town burglar? What difference could it make now?” I asked as I looked at Drew again.

“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 waiting for us at the bottom 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 really crazy. So I could tell a story or two when I’m sitting on a folding chair at an old folks’ home and chewing bubble gum with the old-timers.”

“You mean you would like to do something serious so you will have stories to brag about during your retirement?”

“It’s not just about the stories. Sometimes, my life is a giant bowl of plain vanilla ice cream. Nothing special.”

“I seriously doubt you’re the only one with a dull life,” I said as I shook my head back and forth.

“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 sit at a table at an old folks’ home. And, of course, the statute of limitations had 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 was looking at some serious time a couple of weeks ago.”

“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 this?”

“It can be something simple.”

“I promised myself I wouldn’t do this again if I released. I’m retired. I’m training for a new position that does not entail bars on the doors and windows and wearing bright orange shirts and orange pants.”

“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 jobs and an

empty bank account with the financial aid office threatening to withdraw me from classes.”

“Then I’ll pay you.”

“No. I don’t need your money.”

We started walking towards the dorm, but brothers, I looked at Drew, and he looked so pitiful. What could I do?

“Okay,” I said as I stopped and looked at him.

Drew stopped and looked at me. “Okay, what?” He asked.

“I have one 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 until halfway across the suspension bridge. I stopped to peer at the freezing dark waters passing below. I shivered a little. I hadn’t been on this side of town since the police chased me around that one unfortunate cold night. That was a fucking cold swim.

“The waters look freezing cold,” Drew said.

“You should try swimming across the river 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.”

“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 would you like me to take?”

“Phaedra has a Beatle’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. Go!”

“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. 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, smart-ass, before I change my mind.”

Drew walked away. “Good luck,” I yelled as 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 no red and blue flashing lights.

Finally, I heard footsteps approaching. Then Drew appeared. “What took you so long?” I asked.

“Dude, I had to search for it.”

“Did you find the skeleton key?”

“Yup, I found it.”

Drew 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.”

“I found these too,” Drew said as he pulled out several slips of paper.

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,” I mumbled.

“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 said, 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 perfect point.”

“Let’s go.”

Drew picked up the picture frame, and we headed towards the bridge.

“So, where did you find my key?”

“You wouldn’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. Bye, bye, love.”

“Where’d you find the money straps?”

“In her underwear drawer.”

“It figures.”

We started walking across the bridge. “Anyway, the family will know someone broke into their house when they return,” I said. “You make sure to take that Beatle’s album home to your parents’ house and leave it there when you go home for Christmas.”

“No way. I will 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 have spotted the missing album and skeleton key and suspected I had broken 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 clear, bring the album with you when you return for the spring semester.”

“Can do.”

We stopped at the halfway point on the bridge. “What’re doing?” Drew asked.

“Saying goodbye to my girl,” I said as I pulled out Phaedra’s pink panties and tossed them into the dark, raging waters below. The pink panties floated down into the dark waters and floated on top of the river’s current.

Brothers, Drew returned to his hometown, and I had the whole dorm room. Almost all the students returned home 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 search for them.

The Financial Aid Office called early Monday morning and requested 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 out of his chair, came around the desk, and shook my hand. “Glad you could make it on such short notice,” he said.

“No problem, sir.”

“Please have a seat,” Mr. Krause said. Then he closed his door and sat down behind his desk. He folded his hands together, placed them on his desk, and smiled.

Brothers, I looked around. Did I enter the correct office? Did I walk through a tear in the space-time continuum, and now I was stuck in a new universe where all my enemies were nice, friendly, and smiling?

“So, what do we need to talk about?” I asked.

“The university would like to offer you a full scholarship.”

My eyes opened wide, and 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 squinted when I tried to read the microscopic print at the bottom of the document. “I can’t even read this,” I said as I pointed at the microprint.

“Those are the conditions of your scholarship.”

“Wow, it looks like the university is imposing thousands upon thousands of conditions upon 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 and pre-approval.”

“Sir, that is not in there.”

“But I’m sure there is something about a protest 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 generous offer. Although I may be many things, the one thing I’m not is that I don’t sell out.”

“You are not a sellout,” Mr. Krause said as he looked at me.

“Then what’s the condition of 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.”

“Thank you for your time,” I said as I rose from my chair.

“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 left the office without signing that form. Wow, a four-year, full scholarship. But come on. Who pays hush money to shut up a broke, average student?

I smiled because the university must be really afraid of me. Besides, brothers, I should have done the right thing since the beginning. I stayed at the university for Christmas break and worked all the hours I could. I didn’t care if I had to shovel snow, flip burgers, or scrub the nasty stains off the toilet seats in the public

restrooms. I did everything I could to pay that tuition bill. I even reduced my course load next semester and continued working part-time. Then, if I get some free time, I'll see my mom and make sure she's doing well, too.

Brothers, I would try the honest living for a while and see where that took me.

Epilogue

Brothers, would you believe I completed college and became an investment advisor? Of course, life threw a curveball at me from time to time. What are the odds that I would end up working for Phaedra's husband, Steve, who was 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 in Lansing, Michigan.

I think Steve enjoyed himself immensely as he ordered me around and handed me the crappiest assignments. I've turned into his little puppy on a lease. Then Phaedra stopped by the office daily to have lunch with Steve. Although my cubicle was on the far side of the office, she walked out of her way to pass by my desk on her way to Steve's corner office. Sometimes, we exchanged greetings as she passed. Other times, I pretended to be busy at work and not see her. Oh, the pain of a lost love. She always wore tight clothes and wiggled her butt from side to side like a ship bobbing up and down during the torrential swells of a hurricane. But brothers, I will admit, I did sneak a peek at Phaedra sometimes. Sometimes, I missed her body's warmth and sweet smell when she would lie next to me.

Brothers, would you believe Phaedra even sent me an invitation to her wedding. Did she really think I would show up? I almost did turn up and would enjoy seeing a surprised expression on her face, but I didn't. Then I could greet Professor Tremaine, her father, and ask how his teaching was going since his leadership career had capsized. I guessed she wanted to prove that Steve cared for 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 massive scale. Those thousands I stole from breaking into businesses during my first semester of college became pennies after witnessing the large-scale stealing going around me.

I must admit, Steve invented many ways to steal money. At the company, we bought stock at rock-bottom prices from disreputable companies that everybody avoided. We plowed our customers'

money into those stocks and launched the stock prices into the stratosphere. Then, my company sold the customers the cache of stocks for high prices while the company profited immensely. Don't worry; our clients earned a return, too, but they didn't gain anything that the company earned. That way, everyone came out ahead, and nobody reported anything to the government.

Sometimes, we knew which parent companies would take over another company, so my bosses secretly bought stock using bank accounts from the Cayman Islands. My bosses cashed in on the soaring stock prices when the parent company announced the takeover.

A handful of people at the company knew about some scams and how they were designed. I heard the company maintained shell companies around the world. The companies bought our bad debts, borrowed from foreign banks, and used my parent company's stock as collateral to prop up the assets. Then, my company let those firms go bankrupt while my bosses stole everything they could from these companies.

Of course, at the end of the month, my corrupt bosses paid themselves a bonus by skimming money off everyone's account and transferring it to their overseas accounts. One person's job was to search the daily obituaries and search for deceased clients and dead employees. Then, their accounts were mysteriously closed while the funds disappeared to overseas bank accounts.

Brothers, enough was enough.

Although I just sold 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? She was my girl once.

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 marked the spot. I 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 the third to the Internal Revenue Service.

So, brothers, I still came to work every day, just waiting and waiting and waiting. One day, those government agents would smash through the front doors, and I would see the firm's downfall and the look on Steve's face.

Finally, that day had come. One morning, a swarm of agents wearing blue jackets with SEC printed on the back in large white letters burst through the front doors. The number of SEC agents outnumbered the firm's employees.

"Back away from your computer. Don't touch anything," one agent snapped as he entered my cubicle.

I rose from my chair and stood in the far corner as the agent disconnected my computer. Then he rifled through my desk drawers, stacked all the documents onto the computer, and walked away.

After an hour, the SEC gutted the whole office. All computers and servers were gone. All filing cabinets and desks were empty, and employees stood there blankly wondering what would happen to their futures.

I stood up and peered over the cubicle wall, seeing Steve standing in his office, screaming at several agents. Steve turned wholly 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. "Get back to work," he screamed, stomping from the office.

But brothers, we had no work. Many people gathered around the coffee machine in the break area. I grabbed my coffee mug and joined them, but, 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.

"What can we do?" I replied while shrugging my shoulders.

"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. The firm will shut down, so we must find new jobs."

Another person tapped me on the shoulder. I turned to look and was surprised to see Phaedra. “Hi, Phaedra. It has been a long time,” I said.

“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, 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?” She asked.

“I think I have some time. Let’s go.”

We didn’t say anything as we walked outside and around the corner to a little coffee shop. We ordered some coffee and sat outside to enjoy the spring sun.

“Jax, please be honest with me. Do you think Steve will go to prison?” Phaedra asked.

“Phaedra, I don’t know. I don’t know the extent of his crimes,” I said, but I knew the extent of Steve’s crimes. Damn, I sent three large boxes stuffed with incriminating evidence to three government agencies.

“But you think it’s serious?”

“Yeah, it’s severe. 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 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?” She pleaded.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, what will you do?”

“That’s easy,” I said as I sipped 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 working for a nonprofit. I think I would help people and 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 into ravenous, selfish wolves within months.”

“Is it really that bad here?”

“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,” she said as she looked into my eyes.

“I’m not strong. After my first semester in college, I decided to do the right thing. And you know what? I hadn’t regretted it. I went along the straight path and didn’t look back, not once.”

“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 I would confront Phaedra about it, and it looked like the day had finally come. I pulled the money strap out of my wallet and placed it in the middle of the table.

“What’s that?” Phaedra said as she looked at it.

“You don’t know.”

After a minute, Phaedra jerked back as her eyes opened wide.

“I guess you remember now,” I said. “I guess it took a minute for you to jog your memory.”

“It was a long time ago. How long have you known about it?”

“Since the beginning.”

“You won’t 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. The memories, the feelings, the lust came rushing back. 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?” She asked.

“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 and will probably marry a new fellow in prison.”

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?”

“Okay,” I replied, caressing her hand and looking up at her.

Then Phaedra 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, so he probably wouldn't mind if I slept in tomorrow, too.

I glanced over at the following table and spotted a discarded graphic novel with a familiar name, Drew. I retrieved the book, leaned back in my chair, and leafed through it.

I started chuckling when I noticed one of the evil characters – Jack, a master cat burglar and thief. The villain even used a magical key 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 became a successful artist. Perhaps I should write to him and ask for an autographed copy.

I pulled out my black skeleton key and stared at it for a minute. Of course, I only used this key for good intentions. I stared at Phaedra's number as it waved in the breeze.

I rose from the table and walked away while the napkin with Phaedra's number remained under the cup and continued flapping in the wind. Phaedra, I am happy you were once part of my life, but it was time to start a new life.

The End

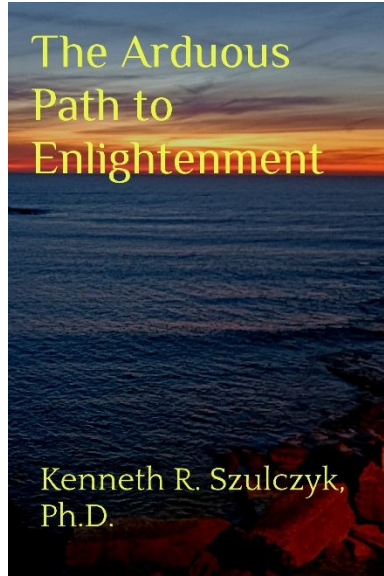
About the Author

I was born in a small town in Michigan, filled with the noises of factories. While growing up, I witnessed factory closures, which brought high unemployment and few economic prospects. I left the town to pursue my dreams and enrolled in a university. My education opened the door to the world, where I graduated with a Ph.D. in environmental and natural resource economics from Texas A&M University. With my degree, I traveled and lived in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Republic of Kazakhstan, Morocco, Malaysia, and the United States. Currently, I teach economics and finance at a small university in Morocco. Despite my humble beginnings as a poor boy from Michigan, I am doing alright. I am living life to the fullest.

Other books from the author:

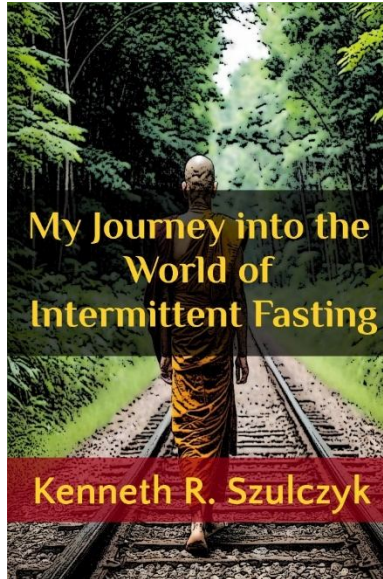
The Arduous Path to Enlightenment

As human beings, we often ponder upon our existence on this earth and ask ourselves why we are here. We search for answers through various religions like Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, and Judaism. They share a common theme where God wants us to use all our talents and become closer to Him. We examine methods like fasting, meditation, lucid dreaming, sensory deprivation, and mind-altering drugs such as psychedelics and marijuana to explore our minds and awaken our spirituality. We delve into the deep depths of our minds and psyches to gain greater awareness and uncover hidden aspects of ourselves. Through this journey, we discover our true selves and purpose in life while traversing the path to enlightenment.



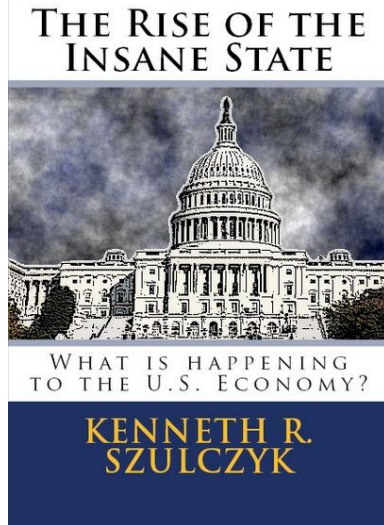
My Journey into the World of Intermittent Fasting

Intermittent fasting is a journey with many twists and turns. We may not be exploring ancient stone ruins in the jungles of Cambodia or savoring the exotic flavors of spicy Thai cuisine from the food carts on the streets of Bangkok. However, fasting is a journey to a healthier body. In this book, I take you on this journey, sharing practical insights and tips on all aspects of fasting. I've distilled my knowledge and extensive research into an easy-to-follow guide, including 50 practical tips on fasting, exercise, and nutrition. My book is a tool that can help you discover the power of intermittent fasting and unlock the doors to a healthy, long life.



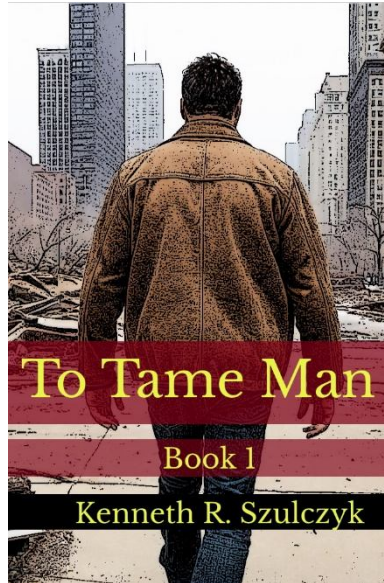
The Rise of the Insane State – What is Happening...

This book offers a comprehensive view of the U.S. legal system, explaining the relationships between the people, businesses, and their government. It's not filled with complicated statistics or high-level economic jargon. It's written for any intelligent person who wants to understand why a government takes over its economy. The book uses numerous examples and cases from the United States, but these ideas can apply to any country. It's a book that makes complex concepts accessible and understandable.



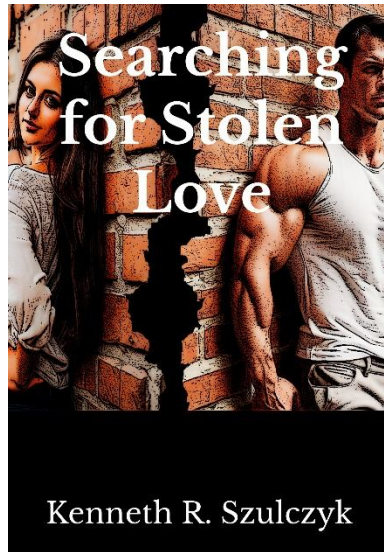
To Tame Man

The United Federation of Cities has been at peace since the Great War, and one of its great cities, Chicago, has experienced no violence, no crime, and no murders in 68 years. Then Susan, the director of the Male Processing Unit, ran out of Growth Inhibitor 37, and several males, including Brown 447, didn't get their treatment. Unfortunately, Brown 447 shows an uncanny intelligence and rises up and challenges the society of Chicago. Mayor Lilith and the Mayor's Guards must restore the social order and return law and order to Chicago.



Searching for Stolen Love

Fox is an American finance professor. He is thrilled to teach at the Bosnian University of Management, a place, where he hopes to make a difference. His future is bright, and he fell in love with a Serbian woman. Having just completed his first semester, he is looking forward to a peaceful winter. But one night, his girlfriend disappeared without a trace, and he is left with a growing sense of unease. Determined to find her, Fox embarks on a search that would lead him to uncover a mystery in the land of blood and honey.



The Second American Revolution – The Building of an Empire

As a child, Jerrick Ray Davis dreamed of delivering powerful speeches to the people. He also dreams of building an Empire across the North and South Americas. These are not simple daydreams but ideas that map out Jerrick's destiny. Jerrick rises out of the wreckage and devastation of the Michigan economy and turns his dreams into reality. Jerrick Davis and his political party, the National Workers' Party, took over the United States government and the rest of the Americas. Jerrick Ray Davis becomes the most powerful man in the 21st century, and the world trembles at his sight. Jerrick Ray Davis also makes a promise to the people. After the 2008 Financial Crisis, he will put all Americans back to work. Good-paying jobs will be plentiful again. Of course, Jerrick Davis puts everyone back to work, building his Empire. This story is about Jerrick Ray Davis' life from early childhood to rising in power. Please read this story with caution; we may be all toiling hard on Jerrick Ray Davis' Empire. As Jerrick Ray Davis says, "All Americans will be united under one flag."

