

## Bullet Proof

Her brother, a gang outreach worker in Durham, told Debra about the job. He said a drug interdiction unit was looking for women to work with the police to entrap drug dealers, street sellers. It sounded easy—drive around on the weekends and buy drugs—and Debra could sure use the paycheck. Plus, she hated drug dealers. Her dead husband had been an addict and never could stay clean what with the dealers crawling over him.

She worked the drug stings in Durham for a few months, then began to get calls from drug cops in small towns all over the state. From the start, the stings felt like God's work for her, and she was good at it. Every weekend, a new neighborhood, eight-nine junky sellers nailed. Like picking ticks off a dog. Though the next day there'd be new ticks, it was satisfying to temporarily clean up the dog, get the little buggers and flush them. The work was a welcome change from the nursing home. Not to mention, she was off her feet.

She felt uneasy leaving her children for the long weekend day, though neither Eddie nor Emily seemed to care. Eddie had his video games, his friends on the block, his bike for getting around. Eighteen-year-old Emily slept until noon, and then spent two hours talking on the phone, drying her hair, getting ready to go out. If Debra asked where, Emily would shrug her shoulders and smile patiently, flashing her dimples at her pathetic mom with no sex life. Someone would pick her up, and she'd be gone until three or four in the morning. If Debra had behaved that way, her father would have slapped her in the face and locked her in her room for a month. But Emily had no father, just a mother who loved her, would never hit her, knew she was smart and wanted something better for her. Debra had watched in confused despair as her daughter took up with a Marine Corps private, a waiter, and, one right after another, three players on the local college's soccer team. The

soccer players were perpetually hungry, devouring scrambled egg-and-cheese burritos before thanking Debra politely and disappearing with her daughter for the rest of the night.

When Emily’s tastes in men changed to older, married ones, Debra didn’t know whether to feel better or not. At least a married man might have someone to turn to when Emily tired of him. The waiter had stalked her daughter for months, peering in their windows and calling so often that Debra had to change their cell carrier, a \$200 penalty for canceling the contract.

Then Debra heard rumors about a high school principal. When his wife found out he’d been sleeping with Emily, she left him, took their four kids to Florida and filed for divorce. Debra didn’t understand how Emily could be so unaffected by the damage she caused. “What was so irresistible?” Debra asked. “Were you in love with him?”

“God, no.” Emily was in a meditative mood, rocking on the porch, smoking a cigarette. She’d kicked off her sandals, her feet rested on the dog. “He was cute, don’t you think? But desperate.” She smiled and Debra felt an urge to slap that sly smirk hard, like her father would’ve done.

“Can’t you date someone single? You’re screwing up people’s lives.”

“Single guys are too easy. I like a challenge.”

What did she mean, a challenge? Like that old song, whatever Emily wants, Emily gets. Emily was rudely beautiful, with a tick-tock walk that slowed traffic. She’d wink at a man, saying “I know what you’re thinking” and she was usually right. She ignored her mother’s warnings and cautions. She was bullet-proof.

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Debra soon had her favorite cop, Sergeant Sterling. He wasn’t good looking, with reddish thinning hair and a weak chin, but more fit than you’d expect of someone who spent all day in a patrol car.

He was going to law school at night. Debra trusted him. She wanted Emily to meet him, because she thought Emily would recognize his fine qualities. He was a man with moral strength who could lead a family, not slap them into obedience. If Emily was so determined that men were her calling, Debra would show her a better class of man.

So, the fourth time Sergeant Sterling called her to work a sting he was setting up, Debra asked him if Emily could be her partner. He asked how old Emily was, and when she told him eighteen, Sergeant Sterling hesitated only a second before saying, sure. A few weeks later, on a hot Saturday morning in May, she and Emily drove to Tyler, an hour from their home in Roanoke Rapids. Emily slept the entire way.

They met Sergeant Sterling at a church, where he would monitor them on the one-way voice link from their car. He was a serious cop, meticulous about protocol and paperwork. He called them Miss and Mrs. Castilla, and his gaze never dropped below their chins, even though anyone could see Emily’s nipples through her white tank top that said “Martini Chick” and showed a good six inches of silky flat tummy down to low-rise jeans. He gave them the plastic bags for storing the product as they received it, and reviewed how to seal and sign the bag, then bring it back to the church where he’d be waiting. He went over procedures, how they should never get out of the car. How, for each buy, one of them would be the designated buyer, and the camera should be aimed at her window, to capture the transaction.

With the policewoman acting as a dealer, they did a trial run in the church parking lot, testing the camera and the voice link. During this rehearsal, Debra saw Emily was sulking, because no one was entranced by her tank top, and she obviously didn’t think Sergeant Sterling was cute. In Debra’s opinion, cute and a \$1.39 would get you a Slurpee. She hoped Emily would change her mind once

they'd made a few buys and ID'd the sellers in Sergeant Sterling's photo albums. See that it was interesting, useful work.

Debra pulled out of the church parking lot, turned right on Tenth Street and slowed to a crawl. She scanned the houses as they rolled by, looking for a sign that neglect and decay weren't the only forces at work inside the concrete block houses with their yards full of weeds and trash. By a yellow-painted door, a child in diapers scratched in the dust. He raised a stick and pointed it at them like a gun.

Although she'd never been here before, Debra knew this neighborhood—she'd grown up in one exactly like it. She knew plenty of addicts, too, and didn't fear them. Addicts were after one thing—their next fix. They broke in and stole from your pocketbook and they sold themselves to get money to get high. If you had good strong locks on your doors and windows and didn't carry a pocketbook they'd look for easier prey. No, she didn't fear them. As she'd told Emily and Eddie, they were a waste of skin.

Inevitable as a roach, here came the first crackhead, a white woman perhaps thirty, almost pretty, with a pixie face and clean brown hair in a ponytail. Debra rolled down her window and asked the woman for a twenty. The woman leaned down and looked them over. Ignoring the whole business, Emily got out a cigarette.

“Sure. Circle around and come back in ten minutes.” Not so pretty after all—some teeth were missing.

She and Emily circled, down Twelfth Street, left on King, left on Tenth, slowing down as she turned onto Harrison. The camera ran all the time, aimed at Debra's window, filming trees and power lines and the four-way stop sign.

Emily pushed in the car lighter. It didn't work. “Got a match?”

“No, sorry.”

Emily said she was bored, she couldn’t breathe, and rolled down her window. “Mom, you shouldn’t wear capris, with your legs.”

Debra had long-since developed an immunity to her daughter’s insults. “It’s my disguise today. I’m a fat lady with no fashion sense.”

“No, I mean you look OK in jeans. But not capris.” Emily tapped the cigarette on her leg. “I need a light.”

“Maybe that woman has a lighter. They usually do.”

“How can you do this? Ride around pretending to be an addict?”

“It gets them arrested, off the street.”

“You do it for the money.”

“No, for the adventure.”

“You’re kidding. This is the most boring day of my life.”

Sergeant Sterling was listening and Debra felt embarrassed. She touched her daughter’s arm and pointed to the camera. “Look, what we say is being recorded. It might get played back in court.” She would make a few more buys and then take Emily home.

Debra’s phone rang. Eddie. She stopped the car to take her son’s call; he wanted to ride his bike to Walmart. Answering that particular call turned out to be a mistake because while she was insisting to Eddie that no, he must not under any circumstance go to Walmart, Emily opened the car door and got out. Debra snapped her phone shut and leaned across the seat. “What are you doing?”

“I need a light.”

“We’ll get you a light. Get back in the car.”

“I can’t do this today. It’s dirty.”

The drugs were dirty, yes. Debra carried baby-wipes to clean her hands after handling them. But that’s not what Emily meant. “What’s dirty about it?”

“You’re lying to them. It’s like cheating.”

“You’re one to talk about cheating.”

Emily slammed the car door. “OK. I’m done.”

“Get back in the car.” Without a shred of authority. Debra knew she had lost.

“I’ll be at the church.” Emily walked away, back up Harrison towards Tenth.

Sergeant Sterling would’ve heard this exchange through the voice link, and he’d expect to see Emily in a few minutes. She decided to circle once more, complete the buy, return to the church, pick up Emily and go home. This day was an experiment that had failed.

The buy went smoothly, but when Debra returned to the church, Emily wasn’t there. Sergeant Sterling took the labeled bag, made a note of its weight and the time. “I think you look pretty good in capris,” he said.

Debra laughed, embarrassed, ashamed of Emily’s backtalk, Emily’s behavior.

“Want me to help you find your daughter?” he asked.

“Gosh, no,” Debra said. “I know where she is. Don’t want to trouble you.” He didn’t seem surprised when she said she was done for the day.

“I’ll give you a call the next time,” he said. She didn’t think he’d ask her again. The sting was ruined, she was undependable.

Debra drove around fruitlessly for an hour, increasingly alarmed, searching for Emily but seeing only seedy men and skanky women who waved and nodded, encouraging her to stop and buy. Her gut cramped with worry. Emily’s cell phone lay on the car seat, useless.

Finally she parked where she'd last seen Emily. She hunched over her knotted stomach and waited. A young kid approached, already addict-yellow under his tattoos, sixteen going on sixty, smelling sour like vomit. He asked what she wanted and Debra described her daughter. The kid had seen her. “Yeah, she’s with Moon,” he said.

“Moon?”

He pointed to a gray cinderblock house. “I’ll show you.” Debra got out of the car and followed.

Beer cans and shreds of styrofoam littered the crabgrass. The two of them climbed concrete steps to a small porch, stepped over a flat of shriveled marigolds. Ignoring the doorbell in a corona of grime, the kid pushed the door open and they entered a room with three plastic chairs and a plasma TV. The carpet was black with dirt, worn away to the subfloor in places, speckled with what looked like lumps of dog shit. The kid pointed to a chair and Debra perched gingerly on the edge. He walked part-way down a hall and yelled, “Moon! Moon!” A pacifier lay on the floor. What pathetic excuse for a mother would bring a baby here?

If Debra had been alone, she would’ve hopped around the dried dog turds and skedaddled right out the dirty door, into her car, down the street to King Boulevard, home to Roanoke Rapids. But she couldn’t leave Emily in the company of these dopers. She decided to follow the tattooed kid down the hall. He pushed open a door. Debra stood on tiptoe and looked over his shoulder.

“Hey, Mom!” Emily grinned. “How’d you find me?” She lounged on a stained mattress. The man lying next to her squeezed her thigh. He was big, fine, and clean, in a white shirt and dark pants like a businessman, too good-looking for this revolting house. They both were. They beamed at Debra as though pleased to see her. Moon had beautiful white teeth. “Welcome, madam,” he said. His voice was rich, Jamaican.

Debra tried to breathe. “What are you doing?” She pushed the tattooed kid aside. “Come on, honey. Let’s go.” She trembled as she gently tugged on Emily’s arm but the girl pulled back.

“Mom, chill!” Emily patted the mattress. “Have a seat.”

“I’m taking care of her, Mom, don’t worry,” Moon said. He slipped his fingers under the strap of Emily’s tank top. Debra slapped his hand away and hauled hard, pulling her daughter up. Emily winked at Moon. “See ya,” she said, and allowed Debra to lead her out of the house.

It wasn’t until Debra made Emily fasten her seat belt that she noticed the glass pipe in Emily’s hand.

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Debra still chews on that day. What kind of mother cruises around nodding at addicts, pretending to be one of them? Takes a daughter to a crap neighborhood to meet her future?

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The years went by in a dreary blur. Emily took to crack like it was her destiny. Thefts, arrests, pregnancies, rehab. Recently, a months-long court process finally granted Debra permanent custody of Emily’s two children. Cecie’s three, distractible, with the attention span of a fruit fly, but there’s one idea she holds onto with a death grip. “Mommy come?” she asks, over and over. Debra used to answer, “On the weekend, honey,” but there is such sadness when Mommy doesn’t come that Debra now says she doesn’t know. Six-year-old Jon doesn’t ask, but when Emily stops by Debra’s house he watches her carefully. He looks to see who’s driving the car, and tells his grandmother when Emily takes money from her pocketbook. When Emily leaves, Cecie mashes her face against the window and cries inconsolably. Jon shakes his head, his face hard as stone. “Stupid baby,” he says.

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Sorting socks, folding tee-shirts, Debra turns on the radio to find a distraction from her thoughts. National Public Radio, something uplifting. She hears a charmingly-accented baritone describe *the luminous mystery of existence*, urging her to *reconnect with your hopes and dreams*. She shoves the laundry basket aside and turns up the volume. The words, that voice, mesmerize her. She wants more. At the end of the program, she hears the speaker’s name, Deepak Chopra. The next day she goes to the library and checks out every book of his that she can find.

She puts *Quantum Healing* in her pocketbook for reading on her break. She forks over \$123 to Barnes & Noble for the complete set of *Synchrodestiny* CDs. *Grow Younger, Live Longer* is on the floor by her bed.

During the day, Debra is too busy to orchestrate her spiritual growth. The alarm goes off at six, starting the routine that gets her grandchildren ready for school and daycare. She drops Jon off at school, then takes Cecie with her to the Learning Tree Child Development Center where she wipes snotty noses and changes diapers for eight mind-erasing hours. Then she picks Jon up, runs an errand or two, and fixes one of the three meals the kids will eat: spaghetti, hot dogs, or mac and cheese. She lets them watch TV until Cecie bites Jon, or Jon punches his sister. Cecie bites without warning or cause, and it’s a problem; at daycare several parents have complained about bite marks on their kids.

The children are calmed by a bath and stories. They finally sleep. In the blessed quiet, she emails Eddie, homesick and suffering through Marine Corps boot camp. She calls Emily and leaves a message: *call me, hope you’re well*. She still pays Emily’s cell phone bill but hasn’t had even a text in weeks.

Duty behind her, Debra takes up her book. For two precious hours she struggles to keep her eyes open. Though Chopra doesn’t seem to address her particular situation, his words are soothing

and optimistic. *Seek balance. Find your inner voice amidst the silence. Breathe deeply, still your mind.* She'd like to still her mind, especially the part that revisits the image of how Emily looked last time, her face and arms scabby where she'd been digging at imaginary bugs. *Any aspect of reality can be changed at the quantum level by shifting its information and energy.* Her eyes droop and she falls asleep, then wakes, still gripping the book. Surely an answer can be found somewhere in these enchanting passages about taking responsibility and sharing feelings and moving on. *Find peace. Discover what really matters.* She breathes deeply. And breathes again.