

## BEHIND BENO'S BAR

We cruised along Market Street on the outskirts of town; the car clock had just clicked past midnight. It was a damp, foggy night, no trace of the moon. We were the only car on the road. Street lamps camouflaged in the mist cast a splintered glow onto the hood of my cousin Duke's red Camaro. He switched off the head-lights, rolled down the window, and took his foot off the gas pedal. A pair of good-luck felt dice hung from the rearview. The dank air blended with an ash tray heaped with cigarette butts to create a swampy tobacco aroma. We could barely make out the silhouette of two men, one tall and the other taller, standing in the middle of the alley behind Beno's Bar.

I'd been working for Duke for a few months, just a couple of hours one or two nights a week. Pretty easy job. All I had to do is keep my eye out for cops and stand by his side. Standard pay was \$200 a night in cash. Darn good for a 20 year-old college student. But he was paying \$500 for tonight; he said it was a real big deal.

We parked the car a few blocks away. Duke opened the trunk and pulled out a hefty satchel. He had summer-colored skin and a naughty smile that clicked into the on position whenever you looked his way. Duke was a throwback from the James Dean era with his tight fitting white tee-shirt and a high school letterman's jacket slung over his shoulders. He had Crater-Lake-blue eyes, slicked-down sandy-colored hair, and a cigarette tucked snug above his right ear. I'd always looked up to my cousin as a little boy in grade school when he was the best high school athlete in the county. I'd throw a football to cardboard cutouts leaning against the garage wall by the hours while dreaming of making his story my own.

It was particularly dark and overcast, and a low fog hung between the buildings on each side

of the alley. The only light was a dim yellow bulb hanging over the back door of Beno's Bar, about 100 feet ahead. We heard Tall and Taller talking near the back entrance to the bar. Behind them was a car parked with just its fog lights on, engine turned off. We got within 30 feet of the car and Duke tapped me on the shoulder, shushed me with a finger to his lips and motioned me to follow him.

Visibility was poor. We ducked behind the row of metal trash cans amidst the stench of dried urine on the brick wall, days-old garbage strewn along the ground that had missed the mark, and a horde of flies buzzing about fresh vomit oozing off the back step to the bar. "Let's wait here," he said. "I want to make sure they're alone."

The two men faced each other, arguing in heated yet muted voices. They were both smoking, their profiles turned in our direction. They didn't seem to notice us. The taller, pale-skinned man with wild, Afro-style yellow hair and threadbare Levis waved his arms and wagged his finger. He said, "Why're we dealing with this guy? I know we can get this stuff for half the price, worst case two-thirds."

His companion looked like he played linebacker for the Rams. He wore a Dodgers cap and a snug fitting black tee shirt that highlighted the time he'd spent in the gym. He clutched a large brown briefcase in his right hand. "True, but only if you drive an hour into the ghetto; a lot riskier down there." He looked around and lowered his voice. "Besides, Duke's H is always top quality. We'll bag it and fetch a monster profit."

I asked Duke what he wanted me to do.

"If all goes well, nothing." He rummaged through the bag. "I don't like being outnumbered. Puts bad ideas into bad people's heads."

Duke pulled a revolver out of his satchel and stuffed it under his belt. He gazed my way.

“Don’t worry, I’ve never had to use it.”

“No way, man. You never said anything about guns.”

“Just a precaution. I don’t know that tall guy.”

I started quivering, almost uncontrollably. My body rattled into the garbage cans and they clattered against each other. I felt nauseous, like I was going to puke. Duke sensed my fear and clamped his hand over my mouth. “Shut up and calm down,” he whispered. We peeked between the cans, checking to see if they’d heard us. The two buyers peered in our direction, then resumed arguing.

“I’m out of here. I’ll find my own way home.” I figured I could sneak out of the alley the same way we’d come in.

Just as I started to retreat, Duke placed his hand on my shoulder and held me in place. “Stay put.” It was a demand, not a request. He was even stronger than he appeared. “This is my biggest deal ever. I don’t need you fucking it up.”

I froze, afraid to move. Duke was at least twenty pounds heavier, a few inches taller, and definitely stronger than me. Even in the poor light, I could see that odd squint in Duke’s eye that conveyed danger to whoever defied him. The exact same look that I’ll never forget seeing in his father Fred’s eyes on the Christmas Eve dinner the cops hauled him away for going Jekyll and Hyde on Aunt Lucy. The bread was burnt and the potatoes weren’t hot enough.

Uncle Fred had served three stints in the county jail for assault, spousal abuse and battery. He spent a year in the psych ward for treatment of his schizophrenia. He beat my Aunt Lucy the night he got out of the hospital, then ran off and was never seen again. I felt sorry for Duke for having such a shitty dad. But my mom thought that Duke was just like his father.

Duke rose and pointed a finger towards the ground beside me, like he was ordering his dog to sit. He strolled towards the two buyers, the satchel in hand. His coat covered the pistol stashed in his pants. He walked several steps before they noticed him. “You got all the money?”

There were no pleasantries exchanged. “Yeah, want to count it?” the thick man replied.

The pale, lanky kid waved his right arm into the air, still agitated. “You ain’t getting nothing until we see the stuff.”

Duke set his bag on the ground, opened it up, and stepped back. “Now show me the cash.”

The linebacker knelt to his left knee and opened the case.

Duke stepped forward and looked inside the open briefcase. He nodded, then closed the lid. He grabbed the handle of the case full of money and back-pedaled towards me.

Without warning, the pale man charged towards Duke and the satchel. “Not ‘til we test that shit.”

Duke was startled and stumbled backwards. He dropped the briefcase and reached for his gun. The tall man lunged forward, and threw his hand inside his coat as if reaching for a weapon.

Duke didn’t hesitate. He shot him in the chest. The hairy man collapsed.

His husky companion bull-rushed into Duke from behind. They both toppled to the ground and the pistol went off. Duke grasped his knee as though hit by the errant bullet. But he managed to roll to his side and fire off two shots into the linebacker’s upper torso. The muscle man’s body went limp and collapsed atop my cousin, blood draining onto Duke. The echo of low velocity explosions ricocheted off surrounding walls, and puffs of gun-smoke ascended until losing its identity in the hovering fog.

Duke screeched and shoved the corpse off him. An expanding stain on the front of his white

tee-shirt gave him the appearance of being the one shot in the heart instead of the strongman he'd just murdered. Both drug buyers lay still on the ground, arms and legs askew, their hands empty. The taller man's eyes rolled back, his mouth agape. The other's nose was bent and smashed into the concrete, partially submerged in the blood pool.

Duke whimpered and curled up on the ground, clenching his knee with both hands, his face contorted. He didn't look so tough thrashing around on the pavement. The puddle of blood swelled about him, a few cigarette butts floating to the top.

I rushed towards the men on the ground. I held up at the edge of the pool, afraid to set foot into the quagmire, as if touching the blood of the deceased might condemn me to the same fate.

Between moans, Duke tossed his keys and commanded me to grab the cases. "Get the car and come back for me. Fast." He rolled away from me, clutched his knee, and resumed groaning.

I didn't hesitate, relieved for the permission to flee. I grabbed both bags and bolted out of the alley towards the Camaro, just a few blocks away. Sirens screamed through the night air, louder as they approached from different directions. I slowed to a power walk, then pressed against the front of a 24-hour laundromat as two squad cars jettied past. Followed by an ambulance.

When I got to the Camaro I pulled the keys out of my pocket, hesitated, then decided against getting in. I wiped down the passenger door handle with my tee-shirt. I didn't want to be linked to his car, or my cousin's bloody drug deal. And I especially didn't want to be connected to Duke. I'd known for some time that I should stop helping him with his drug deals. I wanted to get out. But Duke's sweet-talking charm and the easy money kept me coming back.

It was a five mile walk back to my room and my legs trembled with each step. The bags were heavy. But I found peace in the solitude. I figured that Duke was done for, and that I'd never

see him again. I was consoled by the thought.

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I stashed the cases of drugs and cash through a large intake vent in the ceiling of my room. I was nervous for days after the shooting, terrified that some cop or lawyer might come knocking on my door and drag me away.

Duke pleaded guilty to second degree murder, most likely hoping for a merciful sentence. But since he killed two unarmed men, had two prior felony convictions, and in consideration of California's 3-strike law, the judge sentenced him to life in prison. With the guilty plea, they jumped directly from the arraignment to the sentencing hearing. Duke was shipped to the state penitentiary within a month. I didn't attend either hearing, but a friend helped me obtain copies of the transcripts. I pored over every word. My name was never mentioned.

I was free and Duke was out of my life forever.

I confirmed that the white powder was high grade heroin with a local addict friend. I sold the smack piecemeal to a number of wholesale dealers, some in the vicinity, and others a few towns away. With the proceeds from the drugs and the buyer's briefcase full of cash, I'd racked up nearly \$200,000. Duke sure couldn't spend that money in prison. Now it was mine. I started easing back into my old life.

Even before hooking up with Duke, I'd spent most of my life getting into trouble. I'd been suspended twice in junior high school, once for fighting and another time for ditching school. Then my behavior tumbled into the gutter during high school. I started drinking in 9<sup>th</sup> grade and smoking dope during my sophomore year.

I got caught trading a set of nunchucks for a knife on campus. The vice principal in charge

of discipline looked straight at my parents and said, “Zeke’s not a bad boy. He just did a bad thing.” Dad chuckled and told Mr. Sauer that he was over-reacting. “I always carried a pocket knife to school.” The vice principal opened his drawer and pulled out a knife the size of a small machete with a rhinestone handle and a two-headed cobra with bloodshot eyes and behemoth fangs etched into the blade. Mom’s eyes got round, her mouth agape. All she could say was, “Grrrr.” Dad threatened to sue the school for lax security.

The parties only got bigger and more rowdy in college. I was drunk every weekend and stoned most of the time. I slept in, missed classes and played cards until the early hours of the morning. I’d sober up and pop No-Doze long enough to cram for a test, then retreated right back into an inebriated state.

A little over a year after the episode with Duke, the drunken stupors and wobbly knees vanished in the last semester of my senior year when I met Nikki. I heard the call for fourth in a bridge game down the hall and stumbled into her room. We played cards until midnight, then dumped the other couple and wandered down the street to the local all-night coffee house. Streaks of pink and powder blue weaved their way through her long, straight blonde hair, and the brass loop earrings gave her the look of a pirate lass. I leaned closer across the table, allured by the aroma of lavender perfume, and hypnotized by her Parisian accent. We talked about Einstein, flying our own spaceship to Mars, the Packers and Jesus. I asked her if she wanted to share some weed. She said, “Moi! I doo not zmoke zees scheet.”

She didn’t see me drop the pot to the floor and smash it with my foot. By 5am we were naming our kids. We went back to her place and made love right through my math class and a chemistry mid-term. I never smoked another joint in my life.

We were married six months later, had three kids, and grew vegetables in our backyard. Whenever my mother-in-law visited, we sang old western ballads, played Monopoly until late at night, and I ate like the king of France. Nikki made me jambon and eggs with a croissant every morning. And I went to bed sober every night.

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Then one day, about 20 years later, I received a letter from my cousin Duke.

I strolled to the mailbox and retrieved the mail like I did every day when I got home from work. The letter was addressed to me, but the handwriting was that of a child. The return address was the state penitentiary and I knew at once that it was from Duke. I ripped the envelope and read the first line. I felt unsteady, weakened by a rush of nausea. Had I not been leaning on the mailbox, I might have toppled over.

Dear Zeke,

They're letting me out of this shithole a week from Wednesday, the 10<sup>th</sup>. Come pick me up at 11am, I'll be at the south gate. We got a lot to talk about. Bring cigarettes.

Duke

Duke didn't even hesitate to shoot those drug buyers. And now he was coming back for the cases of heroin and hundred dollar bills that I was supposed to be holding for him. What would he do to me if I couldn't come up with the cash for him? He'd just paid 20 years of his life for that money.

By the second reading, the scariest thought of all struck me. That maniac knew my address;



he knew where my family and I lived.

The money, it was gone. Long ago. Some went to the Porsche 911 I paid green cash for. Wrecked it on the way home from the dealer before calling in for the insurance. Then there was that three month trip to Europe between my junior and senior year before I met Nikki. I smoked and drank some of it and probably tossed a little around to my buddies. As for the rest, I couldn't tell you where it went. It was just gone. All two hundred grand. After the judge gave him that life sentence, I never even dreamed about Duke coming back to get it.

I thought of Nikki. We'd always shared everything, no secrets. Well, almost no secrets. I'd never told her about Duke, the drugs, or the briefcase full of cash. Didn't see any need. That happened long before we met each other. I wasn't sure how upset she'd be about this revelation coming 20 years later. But I didn't see any point in taking the risk. I just had to come up with \$200,000 to zap that psycho cousin out of my life.

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I tried to refinance our house to get \$200,000 in cash. I completed the application at the bank. But then they told me that Nikki also had to sign for the loan.

I had no desire to bring Nikki in on this. I stomped towards my car, shredded the loan application on the go, and dumped it into a trash can in front of the corner drugstore.

A few days later I pulled \$50,000 out of my 401K plan, the maximum amount the plan would allow me to borrow. Told Marjorie, the office manager, it was for an emergency and she obliged. I couldn't believe she gave it to me the same day. I was lucky she forgot about the spousal consent requirements.

By two that afternoon I was sitting in the back room of the nearby Indian Casino in a high stakes poker game. I'd played hundreds of hours of cards in college. I was a little out of practice, but didn't figure I'd have any problem whittling away at that two hundred grand. I was disciplined and managed my money well. But most importantly, I knew when to be passive, when to play aggressive, and when to charge in for the kill.

By five o'clock I was driving home for dinner with empty pockets. I'd been running a little bad for a while, but the cards started turning my way; won a few pots. Then I got the kind of game I came for, most everyone hanging in to the end. Pot was huge. I was all in holding kings full of jacks. I could see Duke erased from my life forever. Then some over-talkative rookie at the far end of the table dead drew a pair at the end and beat me with four deuces. I had to lean on the railing all the way to the front door just to stay upright.

I moped around the house over the weekend. Nightmares were relentless. Every couple hours I'd have a different dream of how Duke did me in. Duke tied me to a pole, back to back with Joan of Arc, and burned me at the stake. Duke hid behind a Leatherface mask and buzz-sawed me into chicken-soup-sized bits of meat. Duke the Butcher impaled me on a stake and left me on display for the whole town to witness. Another night he yanked my tongue out and ate it raw while my kids and I were forced to watch. Nikki comforted me when I woke up, but she started asking questions, getting suspicious. I just passed them off as weird dreams. She knew there was more to it than that.

I was scared shitless of Duke. But I was even more petrified of losing Nikki. I'd lied to her for the first time ever, drained our 401K, and endangered her and the kids.

By the next day I'd resigned myself to my destiny. I was going to die a really shitty death. I went out for a long run to clear my head and come up with a plan. I had to make amends with Nikki. I resolved to tell her everything, about Duke, the letter, the shootout, the drug money, the 401K, a full confession.

I charged back into the house prepared to grovel. The moment I turned the corner into the kitchen I knew I was too late.

Nikki stood at the far end of the kitchen island, dressed in a cream-colored apron adorned with images of short mustachioed Frenchmen drinking red wine. Puffs of flour splattered on her cheeks and hair, and bread dough stretched out on the counter in front of her. Only French women know how to tilt their left hip higher than their right just so, hold a tiger stare longer than the statue of the David, and convey anger with the way they fold their arms over their chest.

She slid a piece a paper across the granite surface in my direction. "You'd best start doing your own laundry if you want to use your sock drawer as a hiding place." Then she resumed rolling out the dough.

I didn't need to pick it up. I recognized the crinkled corners and coffee stain on Duke's letter. "He's my cousin, Duke." I started to tell her about the briefcase full of cash and the satchel of heroin. But she interrupted.

"I know who Duke is. I had a long talk with your mother." She kept her head down, grinding the shit out of that bread dough. "He murders people."

"I can explain everything." I took a step towards her. She looked up, the rolling pin hoisted in one hand over her shoulder. I retreated.

Nikki's been in this country for 25 years and speaks perfect American English. But she started talking too fast, co-mingling French words with the English, and her accent got so thick that I could barely understand her. "Marjorie from the office called this morning. I had to go in and sign consent forms for the \$50,000 you took out of the 401K plan. Our 401K plan."

"If you'll please just hear me out." It was at that moment that I lost all control of my bodily motion. I actually placed my hands and palms flat against one another in a Mother Teresa prayer pose and knelt to one knee.

Nikki couldn't hold back an instinctive laugh. Not the type of laugh that says the joke you just told was funny. But the kind of laugh that says you are the joke. "I'm picking the kids up from school." She removed her apron and grabbed her car keys. "Then we're going to my mother's house."

"Nikki, please."

She barged past me. "I don't trust you anymore."

Nikki stomped out the front door and I immediately resorted to cyber-groveling. I called her every half hour. I left long syrupy messages, begging forgiveness. I confessed everything, all my sins. I told her about Duke, my uncle Fred, being recruited for the drug deal, the shootings in the alley, selling the heroin and squandering the money. I admitted to gambling away our 401K savings.

I fired off one text message after another in rapid succession, hundreds over the next several hours; felt like a thousand. Professed my love in every mushy way I could imagine. Even scoured the online Cliff notes of Romeo and Juliet, Casanova, and Don Juan de la Mancha for more material. Didn't receive a response, not a single one. Not even an emoji.

Nightmares of Duke killing me in new and more gruesome ways kept me awake all night.  
No Nikki to comfort me.

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I hopped into the car the next morning and drove straight to my last resort.

Jim Bob's Pawn and Gun Shop was a few hours drive away, located on the surly side of a rundown forgotten desert town. Steel bars crisscrossed the doors and windows, and decades-old paint peeled off the 12-inch cinder block walls. A hand-painted sign made out of an old piece of plywood hanging above the front window left little doubt about what awaited on the other side of the fortress door. "*A Gun in the hand is better than a Cop on the phone.*" The only Yelp review I could find for the place said, "Leave your wife at home."

I stepped inside. A retired 300 pound left tackle checked ID and sneered at anybody brave enough to enter. All four interior walls were covered by floor to ceiling home-made racks holding every kind of rifle and automatic weapon you could imagine: rimfire, centerfire, selective fire, single shot, lever action, pump action, automatic, semi-automatic, long barrels, short barrels, shotguns, AR, AK and more. I only knew this because I could read labels. I didn't know shit about guns and rifles. I actually hated those things. Voted for Obama twice solely because the NRA endorsed the other guy. Glass counters in front of each wall encased the pistols, revolvers and anything else held in one hand.

A six foot four fat man wobbled up to me; he looked like the doorman's twin brother. A Guns N' Roses tee shirt barely covered the belly hanging over his belt, spider veins splashed across his nose and cheeks, and a smudged tattoo of the Lone Ranger was carved into his left forearm. He wore a ratty Texas Rangers cowboy hat with a sheriff's badge pinned to the front, and a Hopalong

Cassidy red bandana with a hole in it wrapped around his neck. “Watcha lookin’ for?”

I tried to keep my cool. I bent over the case and scrutinized the weapons as though I knew the differences between them. “I need a gun.”

He leaned across the counter. I could smell the beer and sour eggs on his breath. “Well, duh. What kind?”

I stuffed my hands in my pocket so he wouldn’t notice them shaking. “One that’s small enough to fit under my belt, but is light-weight and dependable.”

“You mean one that’ll kill the son-of-a-bitch you’re shootin’ at.” His gut vibrated as he exploded in laughter. Then his face instantly returned to grouch.

I feigned a smile and nodded my head. “Got something like that?” I glanced towards the door just to be sure nobody had locked it behind me.

He stared at me for a second, a creepy glare, then broke into a big grin. “I got just the piece for you. Came in last night. Won’t last long.” He slid open the glass case, pulled out a revolver, and handed it to me. “Glock-19, can’t do no better for the price.”

I examined the weapon, turning it over in my hands, testing the weight. Didn’t want to seem too anxious. “How much?”

“\$399. Quite a bargain. Cash only.” He gnarled his upper lip, challenging me to say no. “Won’t last long”

“So you said.” I kept my head down. “If it includes the bullets, I’ll take it.”

“Done.” He slid a piece of paper across the counter. “Fill it out and sign at the bottom.” He leaned over my shoulder as I completed the form 4473. He snatched it away and held out his hand. “ID.” I gave him my driver’s license and he waddled through a rear door while calling back, “NICS

gonna take a few minutes.”

I waited and waited, pondering whether to stay or just run out the front door before I got into more trouble. Then Jim Bob himself came out wearing a green baseball cap with his name stitched onto the bill, sipping from a glass of whisky in his left hand. He was tall, lanky, with stooped shoulders, and so scrawny that my first thought was that the alcohol might be his only form of nourishment. The beefy dude tottered close behind. Jim Bob handed me a package wrapped in last month’s newspaper. “I threw in a few boxes of ammo on the house.” He looked me up and down and shook his head. “You best go out and practice some before you blow your foot off.” Jim Bob and the fat man got a good laugh out of that as they retreated into the back room.

I snaked out the pawn shop, avoided eye contact with the hefty left tackle, and strolled down the street. Then turned the corner and sprinted to my car. I stashed the gun under the front seat and drove away as quickly as I could, minding the speed limit so as not to get pulled over. I debated all the way home whether or not to load the bullets into the revolver.

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Traffic was heavier than expected and I pulled up to the South Gate of the penitentiary twenty minutes late. There was nobody by the prison exit or within a hundred yards. I parked on the opposite side of the street next to a cemetery.

The Glock sat on the seat beside me under the morning newspaper. I’d decided to load three bullets into the chamber, the first to be used as a warning shot, the second in case Duke was still the same crazy psychopath he was on that night in the alley behind Beno’s Bar, and the third in case my hand was shaking so hard that the second bullet missed. Additional cartridges would have shifted the advantage to Duke if he managed to wrestle the gun away from me.

I slid out of the car and stuffed the weapon under my belt in the back, covered by my untucked flannel shirt. I scanned the burial grounds and strolled along a gravel path. The sun shone bright; the air was crisp and chilly. A black haired lady in sweats and running shoes rested on her knees arranging a bouquet of flowers on a grave. A middle-aged couple sat on a bench aside grandma's headstone. The woman nodded as I passed by and I thought of Nikki, the way she liked to sit sideways on our garden bench, her left foot on the ground and her right foot flat on the seat with both arms wrapped around her knee, inviting me over with the tilt of her eyes and a crook in her lips.

I wandered in the opposite direction under a canopy of elms and maples. A man sat leaning against a tree in the shadows. He called out, his words muffled by the breeze. I recognized that slow, country drawl. My cousin, Duke.

He lumbered to his feet. He'd lost weight since I last saw him, stiff and bony. Duke's hair was cut in a Marine style buzz; his skin bleached by confinement. He had a long crooked scar that extended from his right temple to the middle of his neck and it looked like his left earlobe had been bitten off. The oversized khakis and XXXL cotton shirt accentuated his atrophied brawn and protruding cheekbones. He didn't resemble the frightening ghoul that had terrorized my dreams the past few days.

Duke slid forward as though he wanted to give me hug, then extended his hand. I stepped back and offered a feeble wave, mindful of the Glock tucked under my shirt. I felt small beads of perspiration forming on my forehead and upper lip.

“Bring the cigarettes?”

I'd decided against the smokes after awaking from the Joan of Arc burning at the stake



hallucination. “Sorry, forgot.”

He snorted his displeasure.

I tossed him an In-N-Out bag. “I remembered how you liked double-doubles. Got you two.”

Duke slid his back down the trunk of the tree, parked his ass on the ground, and ripped into the bag. He devoured both burgers, a large order of fries and two pineapple shakes.

Then he got yacky. He told prison stories, one after another, gushed about some Pastor Jack, and lamented about the anguish he’d caused his mother. I snickered to myself. Duke may have lost his beachy tan, racy car, cool-dude sunglasses and GQ good looks, but he was still full of the same bullshit he was 20 years ago.

Still standing, I owned the higher ground. “The money’s gone. So are the drugs.” I had no desire to linger and shoot the shit with Duke all day.

He glanced up and shrugged his shoulders. “Figured as much.”

I was heartened by the sincerity of his nonchalance. “Didn’t think you were ever getting out,” I said.

“I’m going to Oklahoma. Got a job working on a ranch.” He beamed like he expected kudos, or some sort of congratulations.

“Who the hell would hire you?”

“Pastor Jack’s brother, that’s who. And I already got the job.”

“They’ll let you leave the state?” I asked.

“Pastor Jack’s helped me a lot. He introduced me to Jesus. I accepted him as my Lord and Savior; it’ll be three years this July 17.” The color returned to his cheeks, along with a renewed vitality to his voice. “Jack arranged for a parole officer back there and the Board approved.”

Suddenly the gun felt like a really bad idea.

“I’m gonna be real careful, work hard, and stay out of trouble.” Duke got more excited and started talking faster. “Maybe I’ll even find a sweet woman with a couple of kids who needs a man around. I wouldn’t mind falling in love and playing a little catch in the back yard.”

Duke continued blabbering like a kid with an unlimited budget in a candy store. I stopped listening. It was clear that the only threat to my well-being was me. I couldn’t help but think of how our lives had flip-flopped. Nikki had rescued me from drugs and the bottom of a bottle while Duke rotted in prison with no prospects, no love. Now he’s rehabbed, exuberant about the future, and I’ll be going home to an empty house. “We gotta go.”

We sat in the car and talked some more. Duke asked why we were in such a hurry. I told him all about Nikki. The revolver dug into my back and I let out a little groan. I handed the gun to Duke. “Put this in the glove compartment.”

He held the pistol in his hands, staring at it. “What the hell’s this for?”

I told Duke about him chopping me into tiny bits, burning me at the stake and all the other dreams. He laughed. I told him about the many stupid things I’d done out of fear of his retribution for the lost drug money.

Duke stuffed the Glock into the glove box. “You’ve got to go home and fix things with Nikki,” he said.

Just then the car shook hard and both doors jerked open. Two cops leaned against the front of the car, elbows on the hood, weapons poised on our faces. Two others ordered us out. Within seconds we were both on our bellies, faces mashed into the pavement, and hands cuffed behind our backs.

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Duke was gone; drove my car to Aunt Lucy's. I'd pleaded his innocence at the scene and when the warden came out and interceded for him, my cousin was released. It was the least I could do. It was only Duke's silence that had kept me from withering away in a cell with him all those years as an accessory to murder. They hauled me off to the station where I was searched, processed, and booked on weapons charges.

I sat in the back corner of a windowless room the next morning with five other detainees. The three phone calls they gave me all went to Nikki's voicemail. Confinement compelled me to concede the anguish I'd inflicted upon others. I'd peddled drugs to kids, imperiled Duke's parole and violated my wife's trust. I remained aloof and despondent, with no prospects for freedom, love or redemption. An hour later they escorted me to my arraignment.

The judge chastised me for refusing a lawyer, then read the charges against me. "Guilty or not guilty?"

I had it all planned out. I was in a confessing mood. I wanted to tell him the whole story, the shoot out behind Beno's Bar, the drug deal gone bad, my fear of Duke's retribution, the nightmares, my wife leaving me, and the pawn shop.

But he cut me off before I could speak more than a few words. "Save it for the trial. Guilty or not guilty?"

I uttered two words that didn't begin with a "G" or an "N" and the judge slammed the gavel down so hard that even the bailiff winced. "Last chance. Guilty or not guilty?"

"Guilty."

"Thank you. The lady in the back with popsicle-colored hair and a brood of kids posted

your bail.”

Every person in the courtroom turned about. Nikki stood in the gallery, our three kids to her right, both of our mothers, Duke and Aunt Lucy to her left. Nikki wore a plaid 1960’s style hippie dress I hadn’t seen on her since our college days. Streaks of pink and powder blue weaved their way through her long, straight blonde hair, and the brass loop earrings gave her the look of a pirate lass once again.

“You’re free to go. Sentencing hearing in 30 days, don’t miss it.” The judge banged his gavel. “Next case.”

Nikki herded us outside the courthouse for a family photo in front of an old California oak. She and I trailed behind the others.

“Thank you,” I said. “I’ve never been happier than when I saw your face in that gallery.”

“You’d do the same for me. That’s what people in love do for each other.” She slowed and squeezed my hand. “But don’t you ever do that shit to me again.”

Nikki arranged all of us in front of the tree. This was my family, in its entirety. It was the first time all nine of us had ever gathered together, glorious, and could very well be the last time.

We wandered back to the cars and I saddled up beside Duke. “I should have visited you.”

“I’m free and I’m part of this family. What could possibly be better?” He smiled and jabbed me in the shoulder. “No need to spoil it with misgivings.”

He threw his arm around my shoulder. We walked and talked about the Ram’s prospects for the coming season.

I’d made so many mistakes these past few weeks gambling and lying trying to preserve the

life Nikki and I had made for ourselves. But I saw only me. I never gave Duke the chance to prove that he could or had reformed. I never afforded Nikki the opportunity to forgive and love me for who I was, flaws and all.

We all went back to the house after the family photo session. My mother-in-law cut vegetables and braised the meat for dinner. During supper, I asked Duke to introduce us to Pastor Jack and offered to drive him back to Oklahoma. He grinned and threw two thumbs up between bites. After the meal, Duke played catch with our 12-year-old in the back yard; taught him how to run pass-patterns and throw a tight spiral. Aunt Lucy and mom pushed the two little ones on the swing while Nikki and I swayed on our old Amish rocker. She snuggled closer and rested her head on my shoulder. But I was focused on Duke. My eyes riveted onto that long crooked scar and the bitten off earlobe. Duke was a lot tougher guy than I'd ever been, and I couldn't stop fretting about whether I'd ever get out of prison alive.

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