

“Do you know who did this to you?” The man’s question came down a long tunnel, echoing through her throbbing head.

Marti Gustafson turned her face from the questions he’d been asking since he entered the claustrophobic ER room. Of course she knew. The memory sent her heart into overdrive. An icy liquid blazed against her cheek and she sucked in a sharp breath, lifting a hand in protest. *Why won’t they leave me alone?*

“I know it stings, honey,” soothed a female voice. “It will take the edge off the pain.” A gentle hand brushed her forehead; the touch was soft, cool. Safe. “Take slow breaths. There you go. I’ll be back in a few minutes. Push the button if you need me.”

“Miss.” The man again, gently persistent. “Once you tell us who did this, we can get him locked up.”

With both eyes swollen shut, she couldn’t see her questioner. No doubt he wore a black uniform, cop hat in hand, shiny badge glinting in the light. Maybe he thought he could help, but he’d only make it worse.

“Doesn’t matter,” she croaked. Moving her lips sent fire across her face. “He’s gone.”

“They’re never gone for long. If we can put him away for a while, it’ll send a clear message. Was he your boyfriend?”

“No!” The emphatic word shot through her ribs and she flinched. Not that Eddy hadn’t suggested it. Numerous times. She’d protected herself with a knife, the only thing she could thank her father for, but the one time she hadn’t kept it handy—

“A relative?”

“A mistake.” The biggest of her life. A deep sigh stung her split lip and she ran her tongue over it carefully, tasting antiseptic, salt, and blood.

“I’ll let you rest,” the man said quietly. “We can talk later. My name is Detective Ben Evans. I’ll leave my card here so you can call me.”

The door to her left opened and closed, his purposeful footsteps fading down the hall. Silence, the first she’d had in months. She relaxed into the bed, her head aching. Even in her tiny Uptown Minneapolis apartment there’d been constant noise, deep voices, ringing phones at all hours. She’d slept facing the locked and barred bedroom door, knife in hand, since Eddy took advantage of her kindness and commandeered her life.

All she’d ever wanted was a quiet life. No drama, no excitement. Just her and Katie. A tear trickled along her temple. She’d take another beating if it meant Eddy would stay away from her younger sister.

When she’d received the landlord’s complaint letter, she hadn’t considered Eddy’s reaction before showing it to him. She should have. Awash in relief that she would finally be free of him, she’d told him he had to leave or the cops would show up. *Stupid, stupid, stupid.* She shivered beneath the lightweight blanket, the memory as clear and cold as the ER.

His cool, polished persona had transformed in an instant, and he’d slammed her against the wall, her toes barely touching the kitchen floor. “You called the cops?”

“No!” she’d squeaked, clawing at his forearm against her neck. “*They* will. Eddy, I...can’t breathe.”

He stepped back and she collapsed to the worn linoleum, a hand at her neck as she wheezed in a breath.

“I’ve watched you talking with the lady in the office downstairs.” The controlled image returned, vibrating with the energy of a rattlesnake. “Have you mentioned me?”

“Of course not.”

He cocked his head of thick dark hair, the gold chain at his neck catching the overhead light. “Then how would she know I’m here?”

“You’re hard to miss with your expensive suits. And there are cameras everywhere.” She pushed to her feet, every nerve screaming an alert.

“Tell them I’m your cousin, and I’m here for a visit.”

“They know you’re not.” She started toward her bedroom where her knife hid under the mattress, legs wobbling like jelly.

The click of Eddy’s expensive boots followed, and she fought the urge to run.

“I suggest you make them believe it, Martha. If trouble comes, you’ll go down first.”

“Why don’t you go live off someone else?” she threw over her shoulder. Because no one was as big a fool as her. She prayed he couldn’t hear the thrashing under her ribs. A few more steps—

“Looking for this?”

She turned slightly. Her pearl handled knife dangled from his long, manicured fingers. She’d seen him turn that smile on “clients” who couldn’t pay; her gut clenched. All these months she’d kept her mouth shut, head down, staying out of his way. Now she was the sole focus of his wrath.

“I didn’t get to where I am today without understanding human nature. I picked you because you’re easy to manipulate, Martha.” His chuckle lacked humor, the glint in his black eyes unmistakable from where he stood in the doorway. “You’re not hard to look at either.”

She set her shoulders against an icy shiver and thrust out a hand. “Give me that, Eddy. It’s from my dad.”

Darkness edged his short laugh. “He’s in jail, sweetheart. Same place you’ll be if you turn on me.”

Facing him, she scrounged deep for courage. “I won’t if you get out of my apartment. I want my life back.”

His was the face of a lion studying its next meal. He was toying with her, as if he could smell her fear. “We could have ruled the world together, Martha. We still can be if you lighten up.”

Nausea edged the panic that kept her rooted in place. “I don’t want to be ‘together,’ Eddy. Give me my knife. Then you can pack your stuff, and I’ll forget you were ever here.”

“Perhaps I should pay Katherine a visit. I’m sure she’d be more welcoming to a...friendship.”

She swayed as the world fell away from her feet. “You stay away from her! She’s a child.”

His chuckle was as sharp as the blade in his hand. “Oh, but haven’t you noticed? She’s grown into a lovely young woman. I’ve always preferred blondes, you know.”

Bile stung her throat. *Enough! This nightmare ends right now.* “I’m warning you, Eddy. If you go near her, I *will* call the cops.”

He considered the knife. “I guess you’re right, Martha. This does belong to you.”

The knife whizzed toward her.

She shrieked and ducked, then lunged toward where it stuck in the wall over her bed. His arms around her waist sent her to the floor, and she kicked hard, connecting with some part of

him hard enough for him to grunt and curse.

She was in the fight of her life. *For* her life. And for Katie's. He would *not* win. Her blouse ripped and she screamed, clawing at him. His fist connected with her face. She tasted blood. In the distance, she heard pounding. She pummeled and kicked, her strength ebbing.

"Help..." It was the last thing she remembered as the apartment door crashed open.

The cool of the ER pulled her back, and the shuddering intensified. She burrowed under the blanket, clutching the flimsy sheet to her chest. She'd survived—this time.

*What if he meant it? What if he went after Katie?* Her pulse rate tripled, and she pushed up on an elbow, ribs screaming in protest. "Katie!" She used the icy bed rail to ease upright, then paused, woozy and panting as an alarm chimed behind her.

"Marti, what can I get for you?" The nurse's voice, a gentle hand on her shoulder. The alarm stopped.

"I need...to get to Katie." She tried to force her eyes open. The door was to her left. If she could just—

"Honey, you're in no shape to even stand up. I'm sure she's fine."

"No!" She wrapped an arm across her chest, swaying. "He said he'd go there."

"We'll send a police officer to check on her, all right? Let's get you back on the pillow."

"But I have to..." The little strength she'd found slipped away, and she let the nurse resettle her.

Cool fingers stroked her forehead. "We'll make sure Katie is safe."

"Where's...my phone?" She'd had it on her. Hadn't she?

"It's right here."

The familiar device was pressed into her hand, and Marti pulled it under the covers,

curling around it. The photos of Eddy's business were her only insurance against him. "I need to...Katie..." The protest trailed off her lips into swirling darkness that inched closer. The fiery pain around her eyes waned and she drifted under the nurse's butterfly touch.

Images faded in and out. Beautiful Katie—green eyes sparkling, long blonde hair swept up into a crazy ponytail as they laughed together over ice cream. Marti had done all she could to protect her—from their mother, from the men who came and went. From Eddy. She reached for her baby sister, but she was so tired, her arms like lead. Darkness beckoned. A little rest now and she'd get back to building their future.

Sam Evans lifted the handle, and the whine of his table saw dwindled. He blew sawdust from the dark wood and nodded. Clean, even. Precise. Setting the board on the growing stack, he selected another and glanced across the spacious workroom at his cousin. Safety glasses pushed up on his forehead, Jimmy frowned at the dresser he'd assembled. While Sam liked things precise, Jimmy was downright fanatical, which explained his thriving woodworking business.

As the blade bit into the fragrant cedar, he kept a tight hold on the 2x6. The tenth board this morning. The ninth perfect cut. He'd settled into the shop easily enough, apparently better suited to working with wood than impressionable youth. When he "left" his job at the Teen Center, Jimmy had badgered him to join the team at North Country Woodworking. Once he'd run out of excuses, he'd agreed. These months of working with his hands had allowed him time to decompress.

He studied the fresh cut. He sure missed the teens. Sharing life, wrestling with issues, eating doughnuts. He'd learned far more from their hard-earned wisdom than he'd ever taught them. His bumpy road had been nothing compared to what many of them lived through every day. If he'd kept his focus—

His back pocket vibrated, and he set the board on the stack before retrieving his phone. "Hello?"

“Sam Evans!” a familiar voice said. “Richard Ellis here.”

“Richard? Seriously?”

“Ah, when have I ever been serious?”

Sam laughed, pushing his safety goggles up on his head, and leaned back against the workbench. “Good point. You cracked up at a funeral.”

“Not my finest moment, I’ll admit. Evans, you’re a hard man to track down.”

The result of keeping a low profile and minding his own business. It had been over a year since they’d talked. “Just staying out of trouble. Why were you looking for me?”

“I have a job for you.”

“Thanks, but I have one.”

“I heard you’re working with your cousin. I’m sure Jimmy’s glad to have you, but that’s not your calling, or at least, not the whole thing.”

Sam rubbed his face. “I don’t have a calling, Rich, so this job is fine.”

“I need a burger. How about we meet at Ike’s at one?”

He’d been fired from his supposed calling. And he was good at woodworking. Really good.

“I know what you’re capable of, Sam, and it’s not hiding in a woodworking shop.”

“Who says I’m hiding?”

“Aren’t you?”

He didn’t bite. Richard had mentored him into the counseling job he’d loved, then fired him from it. So much for a calling. He pinched the bridge of his nose, ignoring the rush of memories.

“Ike’s, downtown,” Richard said. “One o’clock. I’ll buy if you’ll come with an open

mind.”

Dropping his head back, Sam stared at the metal framework of the ceiling. He’d been open to everything at one time. A lot of doors had slammed shut since. “Fine. If you’re buying, I’ll eat. I may even listen.”

Over burgers and fries, they caught up on the past year. Richard’s life had followed the path Sam thought his own would—happily married, kids, a dog, even a house with a picket fence. While he’d never cared about the picket fence, he still yearned for the family Jillian had given to someone else.

Richard pushed his empty plate to the side, settled back in his chair and folded long arms. Two inches taller than Sam’s six foot-two, he was as thin as ever. “So tell me what you’ve been doing the past year.”

“Since you fired me?” It had been twelve long months of trying to get his head on straight. He took a swig of ice water.

Acknowledging the sarcasm, Richard dipped his head. “After you were cleared, I’d have hired you back in a heartbeat if the center hadn’t closed. You know that.”

“After I was cleared, they told me to get on with my life.” He drew a breath to calm the anger that still flared when he thought of how everything had spiraled out of control. He’d managed to build a respectable life after his rocky teen years, only to have it blown to bits by the tornado of events. “I started working with Jimmy and became a craftsman.”

“You always had a creative streak.”

Sam tossed his napkin on the rest of his fries, and leaned back, balancing on the chair’s back legs. “So why me? And why now?”

“Because you’re also creative working with people.”

“And that’s why you fired me.” Which wasn’t entirely true, although that supposed creativity had nearly landed him in jail.

“You know I had to when the charges were filed. But you were cleared, Sam. You can let that go.”

Sam dropped the chair to the ground and folded his arms, frowning out the window.

“Sure. My career, my marriage, my reputation. Yup. Working on letting all of that go. Doesn’t leave much.”

When Richard remained silent, Sam turned his attention back.

Dark eyes behind wire-rimmed frames rested patiently on him. “To answer your other question of why now, the program is taking off. It’s going to benefit a whole lot of people, Sam, especially those who want to move forward. At least hear me out.”

He’d forgotten how relentless Richard could be. “Fine. Gimme the details.”

Richard propped his elbows on the table. “About six months ago, I started with a new venture called GPS, an offshoot of River House.”

Too bad the House hadn’t been hiring when he’d suddenly become jobless. “With the Teen Center closed, River House is vital to the neighborhood. What’s the offshoot about?”

“GPS, Gathering Place Services, is for people who don’t fit at River House. They might be past 18, or they need a different focus. We offer one-on-ones and classes on interviewing, resume writing, computer skills, and job hunting. We’re also offering GED prep courses. That’s where we need help. We have more registrations than we expected, so we need another teacher.”

An unexpected brawl brewed in Sam’s chest between a longing to do youth work again and an itching desire to run out of the restaurant. “After what happened with Andrew and Shareen, and then the accusation, I’m done with ministry, Rich.”

“No, you’re not. It’s in your blood, Sam. It’s who you are.”

“More coffee, gentlemen? A piece of pie? Our special today is Key Lime.” The waitress beamed at them expectantly.

“Just the check, thanks.” Richard gave her a brief smile.

The silence at their table was covered by the low hum of conversation, bursts of laughter, the clank of silverware against plates. Sam’s knee bounced double time to the rock beat pulsing in the background.

“Working with my hands has always been rewarding for me,” he said. “I enjoy making things. And if I screw up, I get to start over. Nobody suffers. I gave it my best shot, Rich, but I think it’s pretty clear I wasn’t meant for that work. I don’t want to mess up anyone else’s life.”

“Wow.” Richard sank back. “I wouldn’t have believed Sam Evans excelled at pity parties.”

“I don’t!” People looked their way and he leaned forward, voice lowered. “It’s fact, Rich. Kids died because I wasn’t there for them.”

The waitress brought their check, waiting while Richard fished out several twenties, allowing Sam a moment to absorb the rush of pain. Richard had stood beside him at two funerals within weeks of each other. *But he went home to his wife and kids, while I went home to an empty house to dismantle the nursery, and wait for the divorce to finalize.* Then the accusation unhinged what was left of his life.

He pushed his chair back, ready to escape the smell of grease and the pounding in his temples.

“If what happened to Andrew and Shareen was your fault, then it’s doubly mine,” Richard said.

“You were running the center, not counseling,” Sam countered. “I wasn’t there for them. I was wrapped up in my own issues, trying to figure out how I’d let my marriage fall apart. I should have been able to focus on both.”

“People make choices, Sam. You know that. And teens make incredibly stupid choices on occasion. I doubt it would have mattered if you were getting divorced or happily married with ten kids.”

How many times had he reminded himself of that? “I know.”

“You might not like this, but—” Richard waited for Sam’s attention. “I never thought you and Jillian were a good match. She didn’t get your work, what you were trying to do for the community. Life was always about her.”

Sam’s eyebrows rose at the uncharacteristic judgment. He’d heard that sentiment from others, but never Richard. “You’re not the first to say that. I heard it a lot from Lizzy and the girls.”

“Sisters know things,” Richard said with a wry smile, then sobered. “Sam, you did the best you could. She chose to look elsewhere. You can’t carry the blame around forever.”

He had no clue how to let go. It had become a second skin.

“So, let’s get back to the job opportunity. GPS is growing so fast, we already need help. I don’t have time to convince you that your life’s not over, and that God does indeed still have a plan for you. You already know that.”

The words stung. Richard had to be surprised to find him wallowing in muck. *He* certainly was.

“The choice is yours, Sam. You can stick with woodworking. Nothing at all wrong with that. Or you can help the community by taking over one or two of the GED classes.”

“It’s not a secret that I didn’t excel in school, Rich. I’m not qualified to teach.” Nor to give guidance or encouragement to people. He wasn’t qualified to do anything except turn slats of wood into something useful.

“The curriculum is easy to follow.”

“Then you shouldn’t have trouble finding someone else. I’m not your guy.”

“Actually, you are. Who better to teach it than someone who went that route and got their GED? And since I’m in charge, I get to pick my staff.”

“What’s your job?”

“Boss guy.” Richard grinned. “Kurt and his wife Vanessa started the program, but they needed to focus on running River House. They heard about me because, well, you know how amazing I am, and now I’m happy to be working with them.”

The corners of Sam’s mouth twitched. Richard hadn’t changed. He envied that.

“So, what do you say? You and I make a great team.” Richard raised an eyebrow. “We’re doing exciting work at GPS, Evans. You can make it even better.”

“I appreciate you thinking—”

“Knowing.”

“I appreciate you thinking you know I might be able to help, but—”

“But you’ll take the next few days to consider this one-of-a-kind offer and let me know your decision.” Richard stood and held out his hand.

Sam pushed to his feet, fear and frustration tangled in his chest, then shook his hand. His meal churned as they headed out into the sunshine. The truth was, Sam Evans had lost his nerve.

Marti savored the chocolate shake. While her ribs still protested if she coughed or breathed too deeply, she no longer flinched with every breath. The ice cream tasted like heaven after two days of clear liquids.

“Knock, knock.” A petite, pregnant blonde stood in the hospital room doorway with a potted plant and a warm smile. “Hi. I’m Vanessa Wagner. I volunteer here at the hospital. Are you up to having a visitor?”

Marti managed a tiny nod and set the cup aside.

“This is for you.” Vanessa set the plant on the window ledge. The green brought a welcome burst of color to the sterile room. “It’s a philodendron. Requires pretty much no upkeep and will keep on growing until you’re sick of it.” She pulled a chair next to the bed. “How are you feeling?”

“kay.” *For a punching bag.*

“You look like you’re doing well for what you’ve been through.”

Marti’s cheeks burned under the bruises. Did everyone know what happened?

“I’m a victim’s advocate,” Vanessa said gently. “When women are brought in after a domestic dispute, I help them sort through their options.”

“Not...domestic,” Marti managed, her jaw protesting. She’d spoken few words since

being wheeled into the room. “Not boyfriend.”

Vanessa’s brow wrinkled. “Oh, I’m sorry. I must have misunderstood. I thought they said you were living together.”

She shivered. “Not together.” The effort to form words brought a sting to her eyes; humiliation soured the ice cream she’d eaten. “Never.”

“I see. Well, I’m here to help. If you need legal advice, want to change your living situation, or maybe need some meals while you’re recuperating, I can get things lined up.”

Marti studied her through slitted eyes. What would this perfect, beautiful girl know about real life? She’d do her volunteer duty and return to her happy life with her baby and husband.

Vanessa set a hand lightly on Marti’s arm. “No matter what your story is, Marti, there are people who can help you heal and move toward a better future. I’ve had some rough patches,” she said, lifting the edge of her skirt to reveal the prosthesis that was her right leg. “I lost every member of my family. Because of my injury, I couldn’t work so I lost my home. But some wonderful people helped me get back on my feet. They can help you too.”

For one crazy moment, Marti believed the passion in her words, that everything would work out. No one had offered help in... forever. Then she took a breath and reality raged back in bolts of pain. She crossed an arm gently across her ribs. When she’d called in sick yesterday, the restaurant had fired her. No doubt the dry-cleaning job would end the same. She’d have to start over. Again.

“Do you think he’ll come back?” Vanessa asked.

The question jarred her heart into a staccato pattern. Would he? “I don’t think so.” She wet her swollen bottom lip. She’d get a new lock when she got back to the apartment to be sure.

“Is he still living at your place?”

“Manager said he had to go.” Eddy’s fist flashed before her. She flinched. “That’s why he...left. I’ll be okay.”

“Marti, at the very least I can see he injured your arm, hurt your ribs, and gave you two black eyes. Hon, you won’t be okay if he comes back.”

She hadn’t allowed those thoughts to surface. If the neighbor hadn’t broken down the door and said he’d called the police— A breath inched out and she pulled the blanket higher. She’d let Eddy take over her life. What happened to the strong, independent girl who’d been on her own for ten years? *When did I lose my backbone?* She eased her chin up. “He caught me off-guard.”

“Do you have family in the area?”

“A younger sister, Katie. We’re going to live together.”

“Good for you. I took care of my younger brother and sister after our mom died.” Her peaceful smile became wistful. “I’ll bet she idolizes you.”

“I hope not. She deserves better.” Closing her eyes, Marti rested her head against the pillow. She was determined to give Katie the best life possible, but it still wouldn’t be enough.

The young woman stood. “You need to rest. I’ll leave my card here so you know how to find me. Marti, I want you to believe me when I say I’m here to help. Whatever you or Katie need, we can figure it out. Okay?”

The compassion in her blue eyes soothed and stung Marti’s heart. Maybe in a different life they could have been friends. “Thank you.”

Vanessa squeezed her hand. “You’re welcome. Let’s talk soon.”

In the quiet, Marti brushed away a stray tear. She’d be okay. She had to be. She pressed the nurse button, hoping it was time for a pain pill.

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Nose wrinkled, Sam dumped the remnants of yesterday's coffee into his kitchen sink. Even he had limits. Two days since the lunch conversation with Richard, and he was still restless and irritable. It had taken a year, but he'd finally come to grips with leaving youth ministry. Or so he thought. The job offer had cracked open the door he'd slammed on his past.

He started a new pot of coffee, then stared out his townhome window, letting the dark roast aroma seep into his pores. Not that long ago, he'd thought he had everything he wanted. A beautiful, if high-strung, wife with a baby on the way. A job helping troubled kids like he'd been at one time. He'd discovered he was pretty decent at listening to and encouraging kids, and at sharing his faith. Life had been good...until God dismantled it piece by piece, person by person.

The ring of the phone yanked him from memories he'd rather avoid. He checked caller ID and let it go to voicemail, too cranky for a chat with his mother. He poured a fresh cup of coffee and played her message.

"Hello, dear. I'm calling about your cousin's wedding next month. Now, I know you don't like going to these things alone." *An understatement.* "I'm sure Betty's daughter would be happy to go with you. As friends, of course."

His mother's middle name had never been subtle.

"You remember her, the tall blonde? You met her last summer at the barbeque. Betty said she's not interested in dating anyone seriously right now."

He rolled his eyes and sipped loudly, as if he could drown out her suggestion.

"Anyway. Your sister said they aren't taking the kids so..."

Her voice faded as the invite taped to his refrigerator mocked him. For eight years, he'd had a wife to take to family events. Now he didn't even have a date. His mother tried not to

interfere, but the whole divorce mess had hit her hard. She wouldn't be happy until he found someone new, and that wouldn't happen anytime soon. He'd stay single rather than go through that again.

He clicked off the message and glanced at the clock. A long run with his brothers would help him focus on something other than the family event he planned to avoid, and the job offer he couldn't.

"About time you showed up." Joey grinned from where he lounged on the park bench that afternoon.

"And you've been here all of thirty seconds," Sam replied. "I watched you park."

His youngest brother bounded to his feet and punched Sam's shoulder. "Why aren't you the cop instead of Ben? You're always spying on people."

"Only the ones who need to be watched. And that's been you from day one." He stretched his hamstrings to prepare for their run, eager to get started.

Joey laughed. "Just trying to keep up with the pack. Speaking of cops, here he is now."

Sam hadn't seen their middle brother for several weeks, far too long without at least a check-in. "Hey, Ben. Glad you finally surfaced."

Ben returned his hug. "Glad to be surfaced. It's been a long couple of weeks."

"Working on a new case?"

"Nah." Crossing his ankles, he reached for his toes and released a long breath, then straightened, his face flushed. "Same drug case that's been on the docket for two years."

The same case Sam had hounded him daily about after Andrew and Shareen died. *Eddy*. The name made him taste metal. If the rat had been put away years ago, the kids might still be alive. Putting him in jail wouldn't solve everything, but it would make a dent in local drug

dealing, at least until the next scumbag stepped in.

“We’re close to bringing him in, Sam. I talked to a girl in the ER we think he beat up. I’ve got a feeling she could be our star witness. I’ll talk to her again when she’s released.”

“How about we run and talk?” Joey suggested, hands on his hips. “I’m aging as we stand here. Pretty soon I’ll be old and decrepit like you two.”

They started at a light jog, Sam flanked by his brothers. No matter how old they got, he still needed to make sure they were fine. He glanced between them. Joey shared an animated story that made the ever-serious Ben smile. As the front man of a band finally getting noticed, Joey had found the perfect outlet for his excessive energy.

The conversation moved to the band’s next show, and he needled Sam for missing the last two. “You’d better be there. No excuse other than being dead is acceptable.”

“And even then, you’d better have a note from your doctor,” Ben added.

Sam laughed and picked up their pace. This Sunday afternoon run with his brothers was the highlight of his week. As the eldest by two minutes over Lizzy, he’d always felt responsible for their four younger siblings. Probably because their police officer father had browbeat it into him.

“Anybody hear anything about Lauren’s new job?” Ben asked, wiping his forehead.

“She texted yesterday to say she made it through her first week and loved it,” Sam said. Their middle sister was an amazing social worker. He lengthened his stride as they followed the curve of Lake Calhoun. Joey’s groan made him smile.

“The other place must’ve been pretty bad for her to quit,” Joey panted. “She never admits defeat.”

Sam cringed. Unlike him. He let his mind wander as his brothers talked. Their father,

Officer Lionel Evans, had thirty years on the force before heart attacks cut his career and then his life short. Even on his deathbed, he'd given a parting shot at Sam's choice of ministry over law enforcement.

"You're in charge now." The once commanding voice managed only a raspy whisper. "Act like it. Don't let the church ruin everything I've built for this family. It's time to step up."

"Sam, watch it!"

He snapped to the present in time to see doggie leftovers just underfoot. His shoe made a direct hit and he slipped, flailing to stay upright. Regaining his balance, he glared at his brothers, doubled over at the side of the path. "You could have warned me a little earlier."

"We did," Ben said, catching his breath, "but you were out in space somewhere."

Sam rubbed his shoe in the grass, eyes watering from the odor. "Whatever."

Joey elbowed Ben. "Too bad we didn't catch that on camera. It would have gone viral in seconds. Squeaky clean counselor dances in dog doo."

Sam returned to the run, ramping the speed again, his brothers trailing him. That little incident too clearly illustrated his relationship with their dad. His stupid choices in high school had created a chasm they'd never been able to breach. Stepping in dog doo now reminded him how far he'd slipped in his job as the Evans family first born. It stunk.

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The next morning Sam tried, with little success, to focus on his job. While Richard's unexpected appearance had been a welcome event, his job offer wasn't. The idea kept poking at him, disrupting his concentration, even ruining a cup of coffee from the Java Depot on his way into work.

He finished planing the board, flipped it over, and adjusted the volume on his earbuds.

Some loud rock music should drown out the persistent thoughts. A light sweat touched his face. What was he so afraid of? Teaching a GED class wouldn't require anything more than presenting facts. He could do that. He wasn't a total loser.

The board wobbled, shearing off too much of the edge. "Great. Now you can do it again. Idiot." He jerked the board off the equipment and turned to set it on the growing pile of mistakes, then jumped. Jimmy stood behind him, arms folded. Sam yanked his earphones out. "Don't do that!"

"Do what, stand here? I have been for five minutes, which you normally would have noticed."

Sam grimaced and set the board aside. "Sorry. A lot on my mind. You need something?"

"My employee back in the game. What's going on?"

"Nothing. Well, I had lunch with my former boss and he offered me a job." He held up a hand when Jimmy's eyebrows lifted. "Sort of. Teaching a GED prep class."

"Phew." Jimmy made an exaggerated swipe of his forehead, and they shared a laugh. "You didn't jump at the chance?"

He shrugged. "I don't know that I want to get back into all that."

"All what? Teaching?"

"Working with young people. Any people." The woodshop kept him plenty busy and out of anyone's problems.

Jimmy's eyebrow lifted. "Yeah, you do, because that's who you are. Working here has been a stop-gap measure. I've known that all along."

"That's news to me."

"Sam, you went through the wringer. You needed a place to get your head on straight,

and I'm glad you came here to do it. But I've never expected you to stay forever. Not full-time, anyway."

Sam scowled. Why did other people think they knew him better than he did? "Well, you're going to have to fire me because I'm not leaving."

Chuckling, Jimmy clapped a hand on Sam's shoulder. "There's no way I'll fire you, Sammy. But don't use me as an excuse not to get back into the game of life, got it? Otherwise I *will* fire you. Now get back to work."

His cousin strode to his office whistling off-key. A smile curving the corners of his mouth, Sam selected a new board. Jimmy might be bossy, but he was as solid as the wood in Sam's hands. It was comforting to have family in his corner.

As the wheelchair glided between the sliding doors, Marti lifted a hand to block the sting of welcome sunlight. She squinted still-swollen eyes and took a careful breath. After four days in the sterile solitude of the hospital room, she'd never take fresh air for granted again.

"Here we are." The cheery attendant stopped the chair beside the taxi. "Your chariot ride home."

If she weren't battling a headache, Marti would have rolled her eyes. *That's hardly Prince Charming in the driver's seat.*

The girl opened the back door and tossed the plastic drawstring bag of hospital souvenirs onto the seat. Toothbrush and paste, comb, lotion, bright red socks with non-stick stuff on the bottom. Katie would get a kick out of the goodies.

Marti accepted help as she slid onto the seat, holding her breath until she was settled, then set the plant on her lap. When the attendant reached for the seatbelt, Marti waved her off. Nothing would touch her ribcage.

"Well, take it easy, Marti." She handed the driver money supplied by the social worker.

The cab pulled away from the curb, and Marti lowered the window. The gentle breeze revived her battered soul. Lilacs with a touch of exhaust from the bus ahead of them. Her first to-do—find a new job. Katie would age out of foster care at the end of summer and she needed to

be ready for her.

“You hab ackceedent?”

The driver’s accented question broke into her thoughts. She met his dark-eyed gaze in the rearview mirror. “What?”

“Your face. You hab ackceedent.”

“Oh. I...fell down the stairs.” *Okay, buy makeup before looking for a job.*

“Big stairs.”

Apparently sarcasm was universal. She turned her attention back to the window. She’d have to sound more convincing next time, maybe blame a car accident. Too bad she hadn’t protected her face better, but Eddy’s attack had surprised her. She set her jaw. It wouldn’t happen again.

Minutes later she contemplated the front steps of her apartment building as the cab drove away. *Were there always this many?* She’d lived here a year, the longest anywhere since getting kicked out at fifteen. Hopefully it wouldn’t cost the whole damage deposit to fix the mess from Eddy’s attack.

Grasping the railing, she took one excruciating step at a time. Sweat trickled down her back as she pulled open the front door with the last of her fading energy. She wobbled into the lobby, anxious to get to the apartment to rest. Who’d have thought a cab ride could be so exhausting?

Fern, the building manager, stood in the office doorway. No smile, no welcome home or glad you’re okay. Just the crook of a finger as she turned back to her office. The perpetually puckered manager would no doubt scold her for last week’s event.

Marti followed and sank onto a chair at the table, a hand over the throbbing in her ribs.

Fern pulled a folder from a pile on her desk and sat across the table. Marti forced the corners of her mouth up.

Fern didn't return the feeble smile, her expression more rigid than usual. "Martha, we have to discuss your lease."

She hated her given name, except when her grandparents used it. "Yes. It's time to renew already." A whole year in one place deserved a pat on the—

"We won't be renewing it."

"What?" She straightened, flames spiking up her spine. "Why?"

"When you signed your lease last year, we discussed that it would only be you living in the apartment."

"It is." Until Eddy charmed his way in, and then used photos of Katie to keep her quiet.

Fern folded gnarled hands on the folder. "How do you explain the man living there these past four months? The one who did this to you?"

"He wasn't living here. He..." If she explained, she'd end up in jail. "He showed up sometimes. We didn't—" Heat crawled up her neck. "He wasn't my boyfriend. Ever."

"If he didn't live with you, why did he come and go at all hours?" Fern's lowered brow gave her a bulldog look. "May I remind you, our security cameras run 24/7."

Air vanished from Marti's lungs. Everything was on tape. Eddy and his "business partners." The exchange of packages, backpacks, and envelopes. And her in the middle of it. How could she have been so stupid?

"He needed...he said there were too many people at his house for him to get work done." That had been his story at first. "He came for the quiet."

Fern's thin lips pinched. Marti tried to keep her eyes wide and innocent, difficult to do

when they couldn't open all the way. "He didn't live with me. I didn't even like him." *Shut up!*

"Why did you let him use our property for his business dealings? Why didn't he rent an office somewhere?"

"I...I didn't ask. I only knew him from the restaurant where we worked." Truth blurred at the edges. "I didn't think it hurt anything for him to come and go as long as he didn't live here."

"You knew it wasn't permitted in your lease."

The photos he'd shown her a month after he started coming flashed before her like one of those flipbooks Katie loved. Marti greeting several of his "associates" at the door with a smile. Accepting envelopes in exchange for packages. Katie with her foster family, Eddy in the background casually displaying a gun under his jacket. Katie at her bakery job, Eddy outside admiring the window display. Gun showing. She'd wised up too late.

"Martha?"

She crashed back to the stuffy office. A drop of sweat trickled behind her ear. "I know he won't come back after the...the..."

Leaning forward, she clutched the plant to her chest. "I promise I won't ever have company again. Please. This is the best place I've ever lived." Begging had a sharp tang to it, like the taste after Eddy split her lip. "I'll sign a two-year lease, if you want. I don't...have anywhere else to go."

Pucker-faced Fern played judge and jury, her pen hovering over the lease agreement. Marti waited, the throbbing behind her eyes making her nauseous.

Finally, the woman shook her head. "I'm sorry about your troubles, Martha. But I have no choice in the matter." She marked a perfect black X in a box at the bottom, turned the paper around and held out a pen. "Since tomorrow is the end of the month, you have 24 hours to vacate

the premises. And, of course, the damage deposit will not be returned to you.”

Marti bit down on her trembling lip and scribbled her signature. With as much dignity as her aching body would allow, she gathered her belongings and left the office.

Homeless yet again.

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Sam relaxed at the corner table beside the front windows of the coffee shop, relishing a fresh cappuccino. The Java Depot had become his favorite spot to sit and watch the world go by, to ponder the crooked path his life had taken, and wonder what might have been if he'd made different choices.

He set the beverage aside and shaded part of the sketch for his next project. A baby cradle. He'd researched design ideas, then had to wrestle his emotions under control. He should be making a cradle for his own baby, the one Jillian now raised with someone else.

Bells jangled as the coffee shop door opened, and a group of high school kids jostled in, their energy and chatter charging the atmosphere. He missed that.

“Hey, Pastor Sam!” A blonde girl waved from the middle of the pack.

He smiled and nodded at her, then at the other girls who giggled and waved. Pastor Sam. The nickname had stuck after Richard said it once in jest. When the kids started using it, he'd taken it very seriously. Faith had been important to him then.

He finished shading the drawing, a bit too heavily. There. At least that gave him something to work from.

“Pastor Sam?” The blonde stood beside his table, an uncertain smile on her face. “Can I ask a favor?”

“Sure, Kelsey. What do you need?” He motioned to a chair.

She slid into it, clutching an iced drink, and glanced over her shoulder at the friends clustered across the room. “There’s a kid we know at school. Justin. We think he’s into some bad stuff, but he won’t listen to us.”

A warning bell tolled in the back of his mind. “What kind of stuff?”

“We’re pretty sure it’s drugs. Like maybe he’s running them for somebody. These nasty looking guys have been hanging around Faith Church after our Wednesday night event, waiting for him.”

Her eyebrows pinched upward. Sam’s stomach tightened.

“Justin goes off with them and we don’t see him for days. The last time I saw him, he looked rough, like he got beat up. And he was real jumpy.”

“Have you talked to the pastors at the church? Or whoever’s running the Wednesday night event?” *Anyone but me.*

“Sort of, but they’re super busy with so many kids. They told the guys to stop hanging around the church, so now they wait down the block. We called the cops, but that didn’t do anything.”

The squeak of the straw she slid in and out of her cup grated on Sam’s heightened nerves.

“If you talked to him, I know you could convince him to stop.”

The idea of giving advice sent an icy blast through him. His counsel hadn’t helped Andrew or Shareen. “I’m not sure what I can do, Kelsey. I think talking to the people at Faith would be better for him.”

Her slumping shoulders were a kick to his gut. She picked at a crack in the wood table. “They said they would try but…” She pushed to her feet. “Okay. Well, see ya.”

“Kelsey, wait. If you bring Justin by the woodshop, I can talk to him.” He slid a business

card across the table, then folded his arms against the urge to snatch it back. “I don’t know if it will help, but I can try.”

Her brow relaxed. “Yeah, okay. I’ll see what he says. Thanks.”

She returned to her group, and he drained his cup. What could he actually do for the kid? Talking wouldn’t help much if he were in deep with a drug ring. No doubt it was that Eddy again, building his empire at the expense of yet another kid.

He crushed the empty cup. He’d tried for months to get the scum arrested. Hounded Ben to do more, canvassed nearly all of Uptown looking for people to testify. Fear kept decent people from stepping forward. He needed the satisfaction of seeing the gutter rat in jail, but so far the man had eluded them all.

Chairs scraped against the wood floor, and the kids filed out of the shop, the bells jangling a harsh reminder of the failure he’d become. Or maybe always had been. He returned his attention to the sketch. It was safer for everyone if he stuck to woodworking.