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**Shedding Light on the Real "Dark Side" of the Criminal Justice  
System: Apprehension, Adjudication, and Incarceration**

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Table of Contents

Abstract.....2

Exposed.....3

*Author’s Note on Exposed*.....17

Slam Dunk Win.....18

*Author’s Note on Slam Dunk Win*.....38

The Walking Corpse.....39

## Abstract

When the average person thinks of the criminal justice system, they likely imagine a black and white world of evil criminals and the heroic police officers and attorneys who either send them or keep them from going to jail. However, no one is without fault – judge, jury, police officer or otherwise – and not everyone accused of a crime is a heartless monster. This capstone serves to prove this exact assertion by calling attention to certain aspects of the criminal justice system that largely go unnoticed by the general population. Written in the form of a trilogy of short stories, this capstone goes beyond simply explaining the standard procedures during arrest, trial, and confinement. Instead, it dives into the details of strip searches, plea bargaining, and the tragic experience of growing up in prison. These stories collectively demonstrate the need to eliminate the current perception of a world in which it is “them” versus “us” in exchange for a world in which the ultimate goal is merely to achieve the best outcome for all.

## Exposed

"Daddy! Are we there yet?!"

"Dad, you drive like Grandpa."

"Honey, just ignore them. You know they'll probably fall asleep in the next 15 minutes anyway," my wife insisted, placing one slender hand on my knee. The big diamond in her wedding ring sparkled in the sunlight, matching the sparkle in her warm brown eyes. I took one hand off the steering wheel and closed it around hers, enjoying the feel of her soft skin under my fingers.

"Daddy! Daddy! Are you listening? Are we there yet or not?"

"Mama, make the baby stop crying!"

I sighed and tuned back into reality as I felt Teresa's hand slip out from under my grasp. Of course Lily would start crying at that moment. Three months old and already demanding more attention than Ben and Adam combined.

Teresa turned to face the clamor of the backseat. "Bennie, no, we're not there yet. It takes an hour to get to Grandma's. We've only been in the car for 20 minutes." The four-year-old groaned and slumped down in his seat. "Adam, can you be a big boy and try to keep your little brother entertained while Daddy drives? Mommy has to take care of Lily," she said, unfastening Lily from her car seat and bouncing her on her lap.

"I already *am* a big boy...duh..." Adam muttered under his breath.

"Adam Christopher Stevenson, what did I tell you about that word?" I barked, glancing in the rearview mirror.

He slumped down even lower in his seat than Ben and looked at the ground. "Don't say it."

"And why not?"

"Cause it's disrespectful." Teresa peeked at me out of the corner of her eye, stifling a chuckle.

"Disrespectful," I corrected, slightly smiling.

“What?”

“Disrespectful, Adam, not unrespectful. Unrespectful is not a word. Now, apologize to your mother.”

“Sorry, Mommy,” he said, hiding half his face in the collar of his shirt.

“It’s ok, sweetie,” she replied, winking at him and tossing a piece of candy over her shoulder.

“Mama, I want some!” Ben immediately yelled.

“What do you say?” I urged him, as Teresa tossed him another piece. “T, don’t just give it to him!” I hissed.

“Why? Do you want one, too? She teased, dangling yet another piece under my nose.

I shook my head. *Where did I get this woman from?* So playful and affectionate all the time – that’s what made me fall in love with her. When I introduced her to my parents for the first time nine years ago, my father said I had finally found someone who made me take myself less seriously.

“No, I don’t want any candy,” I responded, playfully batting it away. “I want my sons and my daughter to learn manners!”

“Mommy, can I have another one?”

“Benjamin!”

“Please and thank you! Sorry, Daddy!” he said in one rushed breath. I turned back to the wheel frustrated, but satisfied.

“This is a brand new car, boys, so don’t get everything all sticky. And no more candy –”

“Daddy...”

“Adam, wait until I’m finished talking.”

He frowned. “But Daddy, there’s a –”

“Adam! Please don’t –” Teresa’s hand on my arm stopped me mid-sentence. I glanced over at her, the obvious question in my eyes.

“Honey, there’s a police officer behind you with the lights on,” she said, clearly worried. I didn’t exactly have the best track record with cops.

“Are you kidding me?” I looked into the rearview mirror to see the blue and red lights directly behind me. I hadn’t heard the siren with all the commotion inside the car. I squinted at the speedometer. *I wasn’t speeding, so what did he want?*

“See? That’s what I was trying to –”

“Adam!” Teresa and I both shouted. His eyes opened wide and he turned his entire body to face the window so that his back was to us. I pulled the car slowly onto the shoulder, hoping the cop would speed by on his way to something more pressing.

No such luck. I watched as he stopped and got out of the car, mirrored sunglasses sitting low on his nose. The boys peeked over the backs of their seats. The officer finally approached my window and bent down to look in the car.

“We’re going to Grandma’s!” Ben exclaimed, much to my chagrin.

“Bennie,” Teresa shushed him.

The officer peered briefly into the backseat. “License and registration, please, sir?”

“Sure, of course, officer. Is there a problem?”

He didn’t answer my question. “One moment, please. Stay in your vehicle.”

We all watched him walk back to his car. Teresa and I exchanged looks. I raised my eyebrows at her nervously. *Do you have it?* She nodded, almost imperceptibly, quickly glancing at the glove box and back at me.

“Boys,” she began, “Daddy and I need you to be very quiet from now until the policeman goes away, do you understand?” she asked, never taking her eyes off mine.

“Yes, Mommy,” they said in unison. Crap. Even my four-year-old and my seven-year-old seemed to know something was wrong, and the police officer hadn’t even said anything yet. Teresa moved to place Lily back in her car seat. Thankfully, my youngest had already fallen back asleep.

The officer rapped his knuckles on the window twice. I hadn’t noticed his advance this time.

“Mr. Alexander Stevenson?”

I struggled to keep my voice from shaking in front of the boys. “Yes?” I had a bad feeling about this.

“Sir, I need you to step out of the car.”

“Oh, Alex...” I heard behind me.

I handed my wife my license and registration without making eye contact and turned back toward the cop. “Officer, can you please tell me what the problem is?” I asked, opening the car door.

“Sir, please just step out of the car.” I shut the door behind me, noting that I could see Ben and Adam’s faces peeking out the car window behind me in the reflection of the cop’s sunglasses. “Sir, there’s a warrant out for your arrest. I’m going to have to ask you to turn around and place your hands on the roof of your car.”

“Excuse me?!”

“Sir, please just turn around –”

“Wait! What is all this?! A warrant for my arrest? Is this about those payments? Because I –”

“Hands on the roof the car, Mr. Stevenson!”

“Oh my God! Oh my God!” I heard Teresa begin to panic while fumbling around in the glove box.

“Just wait a minute, will you? I paid off the rest of –” The police officer suddenly spun me around, painfully yanking my arms behind my back.

“Mr. Alexander Stevenson, you have the right to remain silent...” He tightened the handcuffs around my wrists unnecessarily, sending waves of agony up to my shoulder.

My head dropped only to stare into the terrified faces of my sons. “Please, you don’t understand!”

He continued reading me my rights as if I hadn’t spoken. “...if you cannot afford an attorney, one will be appointed to you...”

I heard a car door slam. “Excuse me, officer –”

“Ma’am, back in the car, now!” he roared.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry! I just want to show you this! My husband’s warrant was satisfied when he made the rest of those payments months ago!” she pleaded.

“Ma’am, get back in the vehicle, now, or you’re next!”

“Please, officer, you’re scaring my children!” I begged him as the backseat window began to lower. They didn’t need to see their father being pushed around by a cop. I knew it wasn’t an image they would easily forget.

“Daddy! Daddy!”

“Mama, where’s he taking Daddy?” Ben started to cry, waking Lily up to join in the chorus of ear shattering shrieking now coming from the two of them as well as Teresa trying to convince the officer to take the document.

The cop spun me around away from the car. “Boys, don’t worry! Everything will be fine!” I called out over my shoulder, as the officer dragged me away. Four little hands stretched out the window reaching for me as though it was the last time they’d ever see me. My chest tightened. “Listen to your mother, and I’ll be back before you know it!” The cop forcefully shoved me toward the police car.

“Hey!” Adam screamed! “Stop! You can’t push my Daddy like that! Stop! You’re hurting him! Mama, make him stop!” Teresa had thrown the papers on the front seat at some point, and was trying desperately to calm him down, but Adam continued to yell. Even Lily’s cries seemed to get louder.

The officer opened the door and roughly shoved my head down inside. I watched my family sitting helplessly on the side of the road, watching this horror unfold before their eyes.

I poked my head out of the open window. "Don't worry, Adam, I'm alright!" I called out, trying to help calm him down while simultaneously trying to convince myself that this mess would all be settled quickly once we arrived at the police station. The cop leaned in through the window and started the car.

"Daddy!" he cried, tears now streaming down his cheeks. The officer pushed my head back through the window. "Stop it! Stop hurting my Daddy!" Adam refused to quiet down and began banging his fists on the window, despite my wife's best attempts to control him. "Why are you being so mean to my Daddy? That's disrespectful!" he shrieked, fists still pounding. Ben merely looked on with wide eyes.

The officer ignored all of them and began to pull back onto the road, brutally tearing me from my family.

"Stop! It's disrespectful! It's disrespectful!" His cries were drowned out by the police radio as we drove away.

I stared at them through the back window until they faded into the distance and all I could hear were echoes of Lily's screaming and Adam's cries of "unrespectful."

Disrespectful, Adam. Disrespectful.

\* \* \*

"You gonna keep ignoring me or you gonna move over and save us both a hell of a lot of trouble?"

I raised my head out of my hands and opened my eyes only to look up into the ace of a burly tattooed monster. *How long had he been standing there? When did they even put him in here with me?*

“What? Are you talking to me?” I asked, looking around the room before eyeing one particularly disturbing tattoo of a knife covered in what I could only assume to be blood on one of his grossly oversized, steroidal biceps.

“Oh look, who finally showed up to the party!” he said, feigning mock excitement before turning suddenly serious again and flexing as he took a step closer, his crooked hook nose less than half an inch from my own. “Move the fuck over, old man.”

I instinctively leaned back, trying to put as much distance between us as possible and moved further down the bench. He looked me right in the eye as he sat down. I got up, wanting to put even more distance between myself and this giant oaf. *Do they not take safety into consideration here when placing people in these holding cells, or do they just not care?*

I glanced back at him briefly as I approached the cold wrought iron bars standing between me and my freedom. Still watching me, he snorted and spit in the corner of the cell. I made a conscious effort not to shake my head in disgust. I looked down at my suit jacket and collared shirt; I definitely did not belong here and had no plans of staying any longer than I had to.

“Excuse me!” I called out through the bars. “Can I get my one phone call? I’m not even supposed to be here, this is all just a big misunder –”

“Whoa there, tiger!” a new younger officer came into view from around the corner. “You don’t get any phone calls until we book you! We’re a little behind, so just wait your turn, Princess.”

“Ha! Yeah, Princess. I don’t bite,” I heard from behind me.

“Wouldn’t be surprised if you did...” I muttered under my breath, still facing the bars.

“You got somethin’ to say, smart ass?” demanded the gorilla behind me. I ignored him just as a loud clicking noise came from the door to the cell.

“Move back!” barked the young officer. “Get away from the door!” I backed up slowly, careful not to go anywhere near my new roommate. “Looks like it’s your turn after all, skipper.”

*How many nicknames did this guy have?*

I was more than ready to get out of there; in fact, I was desperate. All they had to do was check a computer or make a phone call to see that my story was true. Keeping me in a 6' x 10' cell with a bloodthirsty monster was completely unnecessary.

I stole a glance at him while the officers moved around outside the cell. His beady black eyes darted from left to right, watching everyone except me. His full red beard looked as though he could be hiding anything amongst those coarse curls – weapons included. He wore a tattered red plaid shirt with the sleeves torn off underneath a faded denim vest, probably to show off his extensive collection of tattoos. Even the muscles in his thick tree trunk legs could be seen despite frayed cut-off shorts and clunky hiking boots that were so big, Lily could probably sleep inside one.

*Oh, Lily.* My mind wandered to my youngest child. The last image I had of my family was one of their pure terror and hopelessness as they watched me getting dragged away by that cop. That was six hours ago. Lily's shrill screams still echoed in my head, and I visibly winced as a different guard opened the creaky cell door.

"Alexander Stevenson?" I nodded.

"Willard McCulloch?" The gorilla grunted.

"Name's Butch," he growled.

*Butch? Seriously?* I peeked over at him again. *An oaf with beady eyes, a beard, plaid shirt, vest and cut-offs named Butch? Why not just give him a trucker hat and a shotgun and put him in a cabin in the woods to round out the redneck stereotype? What was he here for? Lynching another innocent black man like me?*

My eyes went back to the guard in the doorway who had chosen to ignore Willard "Butch" McCulloch. I hoped he was going to tell me I could leave.

“Alright, looks like you boys will be staying the night with us, so you need to come out so we can search you. Stevenson?” He motioned for me to come forward, but I was frozen in place.

“Stay the night!? I’m not even supposed to be here! That was an outdated warrant!” I yelled, unable to contain my anger.

“Sir, hands behind your back.”

“Hands behind my back?!” I’m not a criminal! Someone get my wife on the phone! Or my lawyer!”

“Sir!”

“I’m not staying here all night! Don’t touch me – get your hands off –”

My face slammed into the cinderblock wall as I was spun around and handcuffed for the second time in six hours. The salty, copper taste of blood oozed into my mouth as my tooth sliced open my bottom lip.

“We’re just following protocol, sir, so I suggest you calm down!” He pushed me back into the cell. “McCullock?” The guard beckoned Butch forward.

The hulking monster slowly stood up, gazing at me with new curiosity as though my outburst made him wonder how I’d ended up here. I glared right back at him, a combination of pure rage and rushing adrenaline making me wish he would make another snide comment. Instead, he silently put his hands behind his back to be cuffed and followed the guard around the corner.

Good riddance.

\* \* \*

*They’re not going to treat me like some common criminal. I haven’t done anything wrong! I pay taxes and go to the most boring PTA meetings just like any other law-abiding citizen. So what I am doing here?*

They still hadn't brought Butch back and 20 minutes had passed. *How long did it take to do a simple pat down and take care of all that administrative stuff?* I thought about it only a second longer, realizing Butch probably had some kind of knife or other weapon on him when he'd been arrested, or drugs, at the very least. Of course his search would take longer. With any luck, I wouldn't even have to waste my time with all that. I figured someone would check the computer and realize it had all been a huge misunderstanding. They'd let me go, and one day far, far off in the future, I'd laugh about how worried I'd been sitting in that cell all those years ago.

Unfortunately, I would soon learn that couldn't have been further from the truth.

I sat there on the bench I had previously shared with what I assumed to be a homicidal maniac, not so eagerly awaiting his return, but Butch never came back.

*Fine by me. He belongs with other criminals, anyway,* I'd thought to myself. I sighed and rubbed my face, trying to smooth out the wrinkles, and then clasped my hands together. The harsh fluorescent light glinted off my gold wedding band. I spun it around on my finger and pulled it off, thinking of Teresa. I stared at it before enclosing it in my fist. *Was she crying somewhere by herself worrying about me? Did she keep driving to her mother's house with the kids? Had she kept giving Adam and Ben candy to help call them down?* I couldn't wait to get back to her.

"Stevenson," a voice barked from the door to the cell. I raised my head, slipping the ring back onto my finger. "Are you going to come quietly now?" sneered the guard as the door opened.

I didn't respond. He made me sick to my stomach; they all did. They'd all assumed I'd committed some heinous crime. To them, I was nothing more than a faceless, nameless scumbag they'd normally forget about in an hour. They were in for a rude awakening, though, if they thought I'd let them forget about *me* that easily.

I stood up and walked to the open door, turning my back to the guard when I reached him. I put my hands behind my back for him to cuff me and allowed him to lead me down the hall to God-knows-where.

An oddly acidic smell crept up my nostrils as we walked through the dimly lit corridor. I couldn't place it, but it reminded me of a combination of my father's old after shave and the stinging new face scrub my wife's dermatologist had given her for me. Either way, it got stronger with every step and made my eyes water. I could also hear what sounded like running water and voices echoing as though we were near an indoor swimming pool.

I ignored it and tried to get my escort's attention. "So, are we going swimming, or are you taking me to the warden so I can receive my personal apology for having to endure this entire ordeal?" I asked him, wincing as the skin on my wrist scraped against the handcuffs.

"Not exactly," he responded, refusing to say any more. We continued in silence until he finally shoved me through an open door to my right. I immediately realized where the sound of running water came from.

As we entered the room, I saw a row of four showers at opposite walls and several handcuffed men lined up along the other two walls adjacent to the showers. Three men were already in showers on one side, each with the curtain half-drawn back. All were scrubbing their bodies with a bar of soap and squirting what appeared to be shampoo into their hair. I continued to watch in horror as a guard beckoned the next man in the line forward and told him to disrobe and drop everything in the bin next to the guard. The pungent odor from the hallway was so strong in the room that I could barely breathe.

"Enjoying the show, princess?" I heard from directly behind me. The guard who had taunted me with all the nicknames earlier stood there with the same smirk on his face.

"What am I doing here?" I stuttered, completely shocked at everything happening around me. Only then did I notice that there was a guard standing about two and a half feet from every shower,

closely watching each man. “I’m not showering here. I’m supposed to be leaving! Didn’t anyone tell you?!” I began speaking faster and faster as it slowly dawned on me that no one was going to come to my rescue.

The guard who had retrieved me from the cell walked me over to the line at the far wall. The other guard walked along my other side, accompanying us to the other side of the room.

“Guess who has the misfortune of making sure you’re not bringing any drugs or weapons into our facility?” he asked. I looked at him suddenly, praying *I’d* misunderstood *him* that time. He nodded when he could tell I’d understood perfectly. “That’s right. And you’d better cooperate,” he added, taking my arm as the other guard left.

“Cooperate? Drugs and weapons?” I repeated to myself. “I don’t have any drugs or weapons! The arresting officer already pat me down earlier! I’m not taking my clothes off in front of all these people!” I insisted as the line started to move. I was getting closer to the next available shower with each passing second. The new guard ignored my protests. I’d started to draw the attention of some of the other handcuffed men in the room.

“Yo, man – chill,” said the guy in front of me. “No one’s tryna kill you. Yet.” I froze in place.

“But you keep carrying on like that, and I might,” came another warning whispered in my ear from behind. My head spun around only to stare directly into the eyes of a bruised harry man with blood dripping from above his left eye like he’d just gotten into a fight ten minutes earlier. I suspected the blood wasn’t his own. I shuddered and turned around. I hadn’t even heard him and his escort get in line behind me. I glanced at the guard next to me to see if he’d heard, but if he had, he didn’t let on.

*How had I gotten into this mess?!*

\* \* \*

It was an out of body experience. I don’t know if that’s how everyone else experienced it or if it was just my own personal way of coping with the situation, but that’s what it was. I was kind of numb to

the entire process from the moment one of the guards near the shower yelled “Next!” to the second I was being led back out of the room in jail-issued clothes, my wrists handcuffed together once more.

I hadn’t realized at the time that I was the next person in line. I’d thought about running to the back of the line for a split second, but the guard next to me as well as all the others present in the room made me think twice. Instead, I had walked forward and was given a towel, bar of soap, and a small bottle of what had turned out to be delousing shampoo. The guard who had been taunting me nearly every minute of the seven plus hours I’d been there – I’d since learned his name was Jeff Tate – had then ordered me to remove all my clothes and place them into the bin at his feet. Somehow, even in my numbed state, I had noticed the smirk by which I had come to identify him had disappeared completely, to be replaced by a look of extreme boredom. I had also looked around at all the other guards, and they, too, wore the same expressions.

*Well, isn’t that ironic?* I had thought. People like me were standing there horrified at the gross invasion of privacy and being made to feel less than human, while these emotionless prison guards stood there, oblivious to what we were all going through. They’d all been so desensitized, in fact, that not even Tate saw it as an interesting enough event to use as another opportunity to mock me. Rather, we’d *both* become robots: he, issuing standard commands that sounded so rehearsed he probably could have repeated them in his sleep, and me, following every command without objection like a puppet on a string. If anyone had been surprised at my sudden compliance after all the fuss I’d made earlier, no one said a word.

The entire time Tate had ordered me around, I’d actually felt like I was observing the scene from above – like someone else had temporarily inhabited my body. From some all-knowing height, I watched as my suit was neatly folded and placed into the bin. I then watched my naked body stand in front of several guards and other detainees and wordlessly perform a set of commands allegedly designed to find any identifying marks, such as scars or tattoos, and to check to make sure no one was hiding any

contraband. I didn't know why they expected me – in my suit jacket on my way to my mother-in-law's house with my wife and kids – to be carrying contraband, but they still treated me like some drug dealer or serial rapist hell-bent on smuggling things into the jail. I was given the same orders as everyone else.

First – *open your mouth. Lift your tongue.* Then – *lift your genitals. Turn around.* And finally – *bend over, squat down, and cough.* My body then entered the shower with the soap and lice shampoo, leaving the curtain half open as everyone else had before. When it emerged a nondescript set of freshly pressed clothes was provided. Beige top and beige pants. No strings, no buttons, no pockets.

Only once my body was clothed and being taken elsewhere was I able to return from my numb state above and experience everything at the exact moment it happened. Up until that point, I'd felt dead. Completely empty inside as though my very essence had been brutally torn from me. Helpless and not at all in control of my body, much less what would happen to me afterwards. As I returned to reenter a body that now felt somewhat foreign, I vowed once more that the jail would *never* forget about me.

And to this day, I'm sure they haven't.

### **Author's Note**

This story is based on the Supreme Court case *Florence v. Board of Chosen Freeholders of the County of Burlington*. In this case, petitioner Albert W. Florence argued New Jersey's Burlington County Jail, as well as Essex County Correctional Facility where he was later transferred, had violated his Fourth Amendment rights against unreasonable search and seizure in performing visual cavity searches without reasonable suspicion. On April 2, 2012, almost seven years after the incident in question, the Supreme Court ruled in favor of the respondent. In a 5-4 ruling, the Court decided that jails and prisons reserve the right to conduct a strip search of anyone arrested or detained for any period of time if that individual is to be housed with other prisoners. The Court also held that there is no reasonable suspicion standard that must be satisfied in order for the jail or prison to conduct the search.

## Slam Dunk Win

Travis Moore sat down at the only remaining table that didn't already have two people sitting on either side. It was an old card table – the kind that teetered without a folded piece of paper under the one leg that seemed shorter than all the others. His older brother Eli sat on one side in a designer three-piece suit anxiously drumming his neatly manicured fingers on the scratched table top. Travis prepared himself for the pleading he knew his brother would subject him to as soon as the guard sauntered away.

Right on cue, his brother launched into some big tirade Travis had no intention of listening to. Eli had spent the last eight months trying to convince him it was too early to be thinking about suicide. Travis had never wanted to hear it during any of Eli's past visits, and he definitely didn't want to hear it now. He'd been sentenced to 15 to 20 years for voluntary manslaughter, resisting arrest, and assaulting a police officer, and he was only eight months into his sentence. His mother refused to see him, and he'd heard through the grapevine that his girlfriend had left town with some rich guy from the city. Besides, there was no hope for him in this town anyway, even if he was released earlier than planned. That's how life worked in small towns. That whole "everyone knows everyone" saying isn't an exaggeration. Everyone grows up wanting to get out, but few actually do. His brother was one of the lucky ones. Eli had been working on Wall Street for four years now, but returned home when he learned of Travis' trial. He hadn't gone back at all in the past year, choosing instead to stay around to help Travis, and Travis resented him for it. Nineteen years old and Travis was in prison wearing a tattered old orange jumpsuit that some child molester named Rick probably died in. When Eli was nineteen years old, having started college two years early, he was at New York University, already being recruited by some prestigious New York City firm. He lived in his own apartment in a nice area of the city, or so Travis had heard. His mother had never let him visit, probably – and correctly – assuming Travis would have never come back.

But these weren't the real reasons Travis envied his older brother. What truly frustrated him was that Eli could come and go whenever he pleased. He hadn't because that was the kind of brother he was, but Travis figured Eli would leave eventually when he realized Travis was a lost cause and return to his comfortable life where his job was still eagerly awaiting his return even after a full year away.

The lucky bastard.

Travis was jolted out of his thoughts when he realized his brother had suddenly fallen silent and was staring at him wide-eyed, clearly waiting for some type of reaction.

Travis raised his eyebrows. "I see..." he said carefully, hoping it was an appropriate response.

It was Eli's turn to raise his eyebrows. "You see? You see!? That's all you have to say? I tell you that you might have a serious case for an appeal due to ineffective assistance of counsel and all you can say is 'I see?!' Do you not realize --?"

"Excuse me?" Travis interrupted, sitting up straighter and giving Eli his full attention. "An appeal due to what?" He wanted to make sure he knew all the facts before he allowed himself to get as excited as his brother was.

Eli, already on the edge of his seat, rolled his eyes. "Were you not listening to anything I was saying? I swear, Trav, I didn't come here to talk to myself. You never listened to me when we were kids, and you --"

"Eli!" Travis roared as he banged his fist on the already unstable table, attracting the eyes of all in the visitor's room and causing a few guards to step closer, hands already on their batons. Eli sat back in his chair, eyebrows raised yet again, yet clearly unimpressed by his brother's outburst. "Sorry, sorry, everything is fine," Travis waved off the guards. One remained closer to the wobbling card table than he had been before, but the others returned to their original positions. Travis glared at him, but the guard did not blink. Travis sighed and turned back to Eli, whose arms were now crossed.

"Are you through now? Or did you want to flip the table over and stomp your feet, too?"

“Just get on with it already, E,” Travis begged, suddenly exhausted. “Tell me again about the appeal.”

Eli paused only a second longer, gazing into his brother’s eyes before unbuttoning his suit jacket and scooting his chair even closer to the table.

“We found out your lawyer kept valuable information from you,” Eli started, waiting for a reaction.

“What, like extra evidence? New witnesses? Come on, Eli, give me the details,” Travis urged. Eli always pulled this, making Travis work for information. It was like a game to him. But this was not the time, nor the place.

“Alright, alright!” Eli clasped his hands together. “Remember when the DA offered you that first plea bargain, and you turned it down?”

“Yeah, I only turned it down because my attorney said we’d get a better one.”

Eli continued, “And then when you did get a better one, you rejected that one, too, even though the DA said it was the best he could do?” Eli’s voice got higher, clearly anticipating the punch line. Travis rolled his eyes and played along knowing it was the fastest way to get information from his brother.

“Yes, Eli, of course I remember. My attorney said if that was the best they could do, we’d take our chances going to trial,” Travis recalled, wincing at the memory. “Look where that got me,” he muttered.

Eli began speaking even faster. “Well, apparently there *was* another offer. Your attorney just didn’t tell you.”

Travis went cold. He felt utterly paralyzed, as though someone had yelled “Freeze!” and he’d lost control of his body.

“Trav? Are you alright? Did you hear me? Travis?”

Travis had heard every word. He just couldn't breathe. Was his brother telling the truth? Was there even the slightest chance he wouldn't have to spend the rest of his life here in this hellhole?

"Hey, bro..." Eli scooted closer. Travis looked up at the sound of the chair legs scratching the linoleum. Eli seemed to take it as an indication to continue. "Stunned, huh? I was, too, when I first found out. I raced right over to deliver the news as soon as I heard!"

"How...?" Travis choked out, unable to form the rest of the question. He stared down at the numbers printed on the grimy jumpsuit, only half listening to his brother go on about some big-mouthed intern who had told him all about it. He was once again lost in his thoughts, but Eli took no notice.

*Intern? What intern? The cute little redhead who always hung around?* Travis searched his mind, trying to remember anything about her, but he felt like he was grasping at straws. All he could remember her doing, if he was even imagining the right person, was bringing coffee. *She was an intern?* How could his attorney keep this from him?

He looked up at his brother who was still carrying on about God-knows-what, completely oblivious that Travis had already checked out of the conversation. Travis watched his brother who was animatedly gesturing all over with his hands. How could he be *this* excited? Travis knew it was good news, but he still couldn't believe it.

*An intern?*

\* \* \*

"Mr. Vitello, here's your coffee."

"Just put it on the desk, would you Caroline? Thanks." Vitello barely glanced up at his new intern.

"You're welcome, sir. And Mr. Vitello? My name is Claire."

"Hmm? What was that?" he asked, still looking down at his desk.

Claire blushed, suddenly feeling silly. "Um...my name, sir...it's um...Claire. My name is Claire, sir."

“Yes, that’s what I said.”

Claire sighed. She placed the ceramic mug on the shining mahogany desk but hesitated before closing the door. “Sir? Would you like me to do anything else for you? I could prepare the rest of the case files or call the witnesses again.” She stood by the door, desperately hoping to be given something substantial to do for once. She wasn’t going to law school to learn how one anal defense attorney liked his coffee.

Four sugars, no cream – if anyone was wondering. He wouldn’t drink it any other way. It was disgusting.

Vitello continued scribbling on his yellow legal pad as if she hadn’t spoken.

Claire cleared her throat. “Mr. Vitello?”

His head snapped up in surprise. “Blair? Have you been standing there all this time? Is there something you need?”

“What? Er – no, I just asked if – My name is Claire, Mr. Vitello, not Blair!”

Vitello took a sip of coffee, grimaced, and pushed the cup away. “Look, if you don’t need anything, I have a lot of work to do. Could you just hold all my calls? Tell them I’m in a meeting or something. And could I get another coffee? I said *four* sugars, Clara, not 14. And use a coaster. This is mahogany!” he complained, grabbing a new legal pad and muttering to himself under his breath.

Claire rolled her eyes as she shut the door. Anthony Vitello was a hard-worker, she’d give him that. He paid attention to detail and got results even when the odds were stacked against him. Things always had to go his way; if something didn’t fit into the major plan, Anthony Vitello eliminated it.

But outside the courtroom, his tendency to be meticulous just came across as nitpicking. He had to have the finest things no matter how small and unimportant they seemed. He’d gotten rid of the sturdy oak desk that every other attorney in that office had used and bought a brand new ridiculously lavish mahogany desk as a replacement. He’d also thrown out all the paper coffee cups and brought his

own ceramic cups and saucers from home. Vitello wouldn't even drink the store bought coffee in the office; he had his imported from Colombia.

Then he went and ruined that by putting enough sugar in it to give himself diabetes, Claire thought, rolling her eyes again. He was always concerned about every little detail, but could never remember her name. Yesterday's choices had been Crystal, Connie, Courtney, and Jackie. Claire wasn't entirely sure where the last one came from. She shook her head as she opened her desk drawer to look for something she could use to make a rough name plate or name tag, but panicked as she looked inside. Right on top of her personal planner was a post-it she'd written to herself at the end of the previous day to remind herself to get Vitello to confirm his 11 o'clock appointment this morning. An associate from the prosecutor's office was coming to talk about a plea bargain for one of Vitello's bigger cases; he'd been preparing for this meeting for weeks.

Claire glanced at her watch. 10:57 am. Crap. Her mind reeled for what to tell Vitello. Forgetting an appointment was not going to go over smoothly. She fluffed up her bright red hair as she paced trying to think of how she was going to tell the world's most organized man that she'd already made a mess of his day before it was even 11 o'clock. The young woman from the prosecutor's office would be there any minute.

"Cassie, where's my coffee!?" Vitello called from his office.

Claire burst in without the coffee, knowing she looked completely frazzled.

"I hope you remembered the four sugars this time —"

"Mr. Vitello! I'm so sorry I forgot to tell you!" Claire began, wringing her hands as she shifted her weight from one foot to the other.

"Slow down, what'd you forget?"

"Your appointment! From the prosecutor's office! And now she'll be here any moment, and you probably haven't even prepared! It's all my fault, I'm so sorry!"

Vitello was silent. He pushed his chair back and walked to the large panes of glass that made up the fourth wall of his office. He looked out at the city skyline. "When is she due?" he asked quietly.

"One minute, s-sir," she stuttered, too nervous to say anything else. Outside the door, the phone on her desk rang. Claire's eyes flickered to the door and back to Vitello, unsure of what she should do. "That's probably her, Mr. Vitello. Should I...?"

He turned around and glared at her. "No, Claire, you've done enough." He picked up the phone on his desk and hit the blinking button. "Vitello," he barked into the receiver.

Claire slowly backed out of the room to leave Vitello to his call. Of course the one time he remembered her name would be right before he fired her. She couldn't afford any more screw ups or she knew Vitello would make sure no one in the tri-state area hired her when she graduated the following year.

\* \* \*

"So how'd you find all this out? About the intern and Vitello keeping the last offer from me? Are you sure all that's true?" Travis asked, still at a loss for words.

"Straight from the horse's mouth, little bro! So, yes, it's all true!" Eli exclaimed, drawing attention to the two brothers all over again.

"Would you keep your voice down before they kick you outta here!?" Travis hissed at his older brother. "My apologies, my apologies. Sorry, my brother gets carried away sometimes," he said to the tables closest to them.

Eli rolled his eyes and glanced at the guard standing directly behind Travis. "Excuse me? I get carried away? Says the guy who nearly broke the table and earned us our own personal G.I. Joe body guard," Eli snapped.

Travis ignored him. "Anyway, you're lying," he started.

"No –"

“You’re telling me Vitello himself told you he kept the final offer from me? Sorry brother, I’m calling bullshit on that one.” Travis leaned back in his chair, waiting for his brother to explain.

“No, moron, of course Vitello didn’t tell me. I overheard his intern telling some of her friends at a restaurant. I guess they’re all in law school, or maybe they’ve graduated since you’ve been in here. You know...she’s probably about my age. I should –”

“Eli! Get to the point!” Travis urged, careful to keep his voice down so as not to cause the guards to end their time early.

“I’m getting there! So Red and three of her friends were at dinner and they were all complaining about their bosses at the table next to mine, but this girl definitely sounded the worst. She seemed almost afraid of him – mind you, I didn’t know she worked for Tony V at the time.” Travis rolled his eyes. His brother and his nicknames. “So she went on to talk about some big case her boss had been working on. She said it had already been decided eight months ago, which is what caught my attention. Red goes on to tell her friends all about how she’s wanted to quit for some time now because she feels she can never do anything right for him. But then she says the final straw was when he was working on this case and he convinced his client to go to trial without informing said client of one last plea offer.”

Eli stopped talking. “Trav...you still with me?”

“Yes, E, keep going! How do you know she was talking about me and Vitello?”

“Easy. I asked her,” Eli answered simply, as if Travis had asked about the weather.

“You what?!”

“I asked her. I went to her table and asked her.”

Travis closed his eyes and slapped his palm over his forehead. “Let me get this right: you got out of your seat in the middle of a restaurant and asked if she was talking about Anthony Vitello and your jailbird brother?!”

“No, Travis, could you just let me finish?”

“Well hurry the hell up, Eli! You don’t have all day, you know. They’re gonna kick you out of here in –” he looked at the clock on the cracked blue wall – “12 minutes.”

“Yes, I know, Travis. Sorry.” Eli peeked at the guard again before he continued. “As I was saying, I was listening to the entire conversation, and I thought she looked vaguely familiar. Then when she said the case had been decided eight months ago – the exact amount of time you’ve been in here – and started talking about plea bargains, I figured it couldn’t be a coincidence. So, I went up to her and asked if her boss was Anthony Vitello.”

“Well what’d you do that for?! He probably told her not to tell anyone. She probably clammed right up when you told her you were my brother, didn’t she?” Travis interrupted, throwing up his hands in frustration.

“Ten minutes, Travis. Stop interrupting. She confirmed that yes, her boss was indeed Anthony Vitello. At that point, I apologized saying I couldn’t help but overhear her, and she sounded so upset that I wanted to make sure she was alright. The mousy little thing immediately turned as red as her hair and apologized for raising her voice and interrupting my dinner, at which point I, being the charmer that I am, said I would forgive her if they let me join them so I wouldn’t have to dine alone.”

Travis shook his head, unable to keep from stifling a small smile. His brother *was* quite the charmer, Travis had to admit. He’d always had girls chasing after him, and Travis wasn’t surprised to hear that much hadn’t changed.

Eli kept talking. “They insisted I pull up a chair, and Red’s friends introduced her to me as the ‘clumsy, forgetful but loveable, Claire,’ causing her to turn an even deeper shade of red. Then she asked how I knew Vitello. Rather than cause her to ‘clam up’ as you put it, I told her a friend of mine interned for him once and hated every second of it.”

“Good one, E. It’s a miracle she didn’t recognize you.”

“I know, right? Figured it’d make her trust me to know I understood where she was coming from. So, she continued to tell her friends the details of your exact case and the mess we went through with all the plea offers. Before I know it, she’s telling us how Vitello hates even the smallest deviation from his brilliant plans so much that he made her swear not to tell anyone about the latest offer. When she asked why, Vitello told her he needed the publicity of a trial and that it was a slam dunk win.”

Travis snorted. “Yeah, for the prosecution.”

“So,” Eli continued over his brother, “she never said anything to anyone but now feels horribly because the guy – you – was found guilty and given 15 to 20 instead of the seven plus supervised release as per the final plea offer,” Eli finished.

“What did you say then?” Travis asked quietly, staring at the floor.

“That she needed to tell someone. I told her if she didn’t, some man would be serving up to 13 additional years, during which time any number of things could happen, including some awful prison fight which could lead to a death that could have been prevented. Sorry, bro, didn’t mean to jinx you,” Eli said quickly when he saw Travis’ expression, glancing around the room at the other inmates with their friends and family to see if they’d heard.

Travis waved it off. “And what did she say?” Eli hesitated. “What’d she say, Eli?”

“She said...she said she knew it was wrong, but she couldn’t risk losing her job.”

Travis’ shoulders sank as he covered his face with his hands, the disappointment obvious in the creased worry lines in his forehead. “So...I’m screwed,” he said into his hands, the sound muffled.

“Well...not exactly...” Eli started.

Travis picked his head up and peered at his brother. “What do you mean ‘not exactly’?” he asked, fists clenched.

“When we all were leaving the restaurant, I overheard Claire’s friend say to another one of the girls that as bad as her boss was, he’d never do something like that and that he’d probably even be willing to represent you.”

Travis stood up and slammed his fist on the table again, suddenly enraged. “Damnit, Eli, how does that help me?! What are we supposed to do with that information? Go on some wild goose chase for the mystery attorney sent from God? I’m in *prison*, Eli! I *am* screwed! And I’m going to be here for 20 years!” he shouted, causing three guards to race over.

“Alright, time’s up, kid! Let’s go,” demanded one guard, holding Travis’ hands behind his back.

“You – out,” another guard ordered, pointing his finger at Eli and then the door.

“Wait!” Eli yelled at the top of his lungs. The room was silent for a moment, everyone shocked at the man in the suit’s outburst, even the guards. Eli started to chuckle.

“What the hell is wrong with you, E? Are you crazy?!” Travis demanded, now struggling against the guards. The other inmates and their visitors nervously looked back and forth between the two brothers.

“There’ll be no wild good chase, Trav,” Eli calmly assured his younger brother, his shoulders still shaking with laughter.

“Oh, yeah? Why’s that, huh, Eli?”

“Because...” he started, unable to control his laughter.

“Because what, E? Damnit, I’m so tired of you –”

“The old charmer got the girl’s number!” Eli finished.

Travis suddenly stopped struggling against the guards. Eli watched as his brother’s face turned from complete confusion to disbelief to pure excitement.

“Yeah! My man! E – you dog!” Travis burst into laughter. Eli grinned. “Alright, alright! I’m going, I’m going, you don’t need to push me,” Travis said to the guards pushing him out of the room. “I won’t be here much longer though, boys! Right, bro?” he turned his head to wink at his brother.

“That’s right, Trav! I’ll be back soon, little bro! This isn’t over!” Eli called out, still grinning.

“Yeah well, for now, it is over.” Eli turned around to face the huge corrections officer he had previously referred to as G.I. Joe. “Visiting hour is over, and you need to leave,” he insisted.

Eli smiled at him. “Of course, sir. The Moore brothers never like to cause a scene. Have a nice day.”

\* \* \*

“Mr. Vitello.” A beautiful raven-haired young woman stuck out her right hand. “Thank you for taking the time to meet with me today.”

Vitello shook her outstretched hand and motioned to one of the cushioned armchairs on the opposite side of his beloved mahogany desk. “Why thank *you*, Ms. Clark, for coming here and being patient while my new intern Kristin got herself organized. Again, you have my sincerest apologies for that little mishap, but please, sit down.” The young woman sat in the red leather chair, placing her briefcase at her feet. Vitello thought he caught her admiring the mahogany.

“Kristin? I thought I heard her say her name was Claire?” she asked, confused.

“Yes, well...coffee? I have it specially imported from Colombia,” he announced proudly, quickly changing the subject. Everyone else in the office drank that cheap stuff from the grocery store; it wasn’t even name brand. Vitello figured an associate from the prosecutor’s office would definitely appreciate his taste.

“Yes, thank you, coffee would be great,” she said, pushing her gold-rimmed glasses up on her nose.

“Excellent. Claire!” Vitello called, careful to remember the name Ms. Clark had used. He wouldn’t have cared otherwise; he got so many interns as their semesters ended that he considered it an accomplishment to be able to recognize them after their first day. Remembering names just seemed unnecessary.

“Yes, Mr. Vitello?” Claire rushed in through the double doors, obviously eager to make up for forgetting this very appointment.

“Could you bring Ms. Clark some coffee, please?” he asked.

She hesitated, clearly disappointed to be going on another coffee run. “Coffee? Will she be having it the same way as you take it, then?”

“If I may,” Ms. Clark interrupted before Vitello could answer, “judging by all the empty sugar packets on your boss’ desk, I will not be having it the same way. I take my coffee black. Thank you, Claire,” she said, smiling at Claire as she left the room.

Vitello laughed as the young attorney turned back to face him. “You have keen powers of observation, Ms. Clark,” he noted, brushing the empty packets over the edge of his desk and into the trash can. “So, shall we get down to business while we wait for your coffee? I’m sure you didn’t come all the way here to lecture me on how I’m ruining perfectly good Colombian coffee, am I right?”

“Of course. I’ll get straight to the point,” she began, opening her briefcase on top of his desk. Vitello winced as the clasps scratched the surface of his desk, but kept quiet. “The last time someone from my office was here, they offered you a deal on the Moore case,” she stated, pulling out a thick folder with “Travis Moore” stamped across the front in bright red.

Vitello sat back in his chair, readying himself for the prosecution’s latest case for why he should tell his client to take their final offer. He just didn’t think it was good enough. This was a 19 year old kid, for God’s sake! Sure, he was legally an adult and even had a bit of a record, but who really considered 19 year olds to be competent adults? The more Vitello had thought about it since the last meeting he’d

had, the more certain he became that he'd rather take his chances going to trial. Travis was a likeable enough kid; no jury would convict him. The way Vitello saw it, the prosecution was offering a deal because they didn't want to risk the trial. That was the difference between them. Anthony Vitello wasn't afraid of going to trial. In fact, he looked forward to it. He hadn't had a big case like this in years, and he needed to get his name out there to recruit some new clients.

*And the best way to do that, he thought, was through the publicity of a trial.* Frankly, he didn't care at this point if they did make another offer; he'd still reject it.

"...which is why we have decided to rescind our previous offer to be replaced by this one," Ms. Clark finished, as Vitello was brought back to reality. She slid a manila folder across the desk to him. Vitello stared at the folder. *Was this a joke?* He had *just* been thinking of how excited he was to go to trial and here he was being offered yet another deal after the prosecution had already assured him that their last one was the best they could do.

He looked up at the attractive young woman sitting across from him. While he had been staring at the unopened folder in front of him, she had been watching him, clearly waiting for a reaction. Vitello slowly picked the folder up off the desk, opening it and scanning the top page. Seven years and supervised release. *Well, that was certainly better than their last offer of 10 to 15.* He flipped to the second page and saw the previous offer listed as well as the original offer of 15 and the possibility of parole. Vitello sighed and glanced at the final two pages, where he and Travis would sign, agreeing to the terms of the plea bargain.

"How does that sound to you?" Ms. Clark asked smugly, fully aware that it was a better offer than any attorney could have hoped for. She crossed her arms and sat back in her chair as Vitello closed the folder and placed it back down on the desk. "Are we ready to make a deal?"

The defense attorney raised his head and stared at the ceiling. It was silent in the huge office for several moments.

One of the large doors creaked and both attorneys glanced at the door. Claire poked her head inside. "Hi..." she greeted them uneasily. "Um...I have Ms. Clark's coffee. I knocked, but no one answered." She squeezed through without opening the door all the way, mug in hand. Vitello held his breath for a moment. The girl was so clumsy; he wouldn't be surprised if she dropped the cup before she reached Ms. Clark, destroying yet another of his ceramic mugs. It would be the third this week.

"That's perfectly fine, Claire," Ms. Clark responded, again before Vitello had the chance to say anything. Claire's eyes opened wide and a small smile crept on to her face. She blushed, miraculously making it to the desk without dropping the cup or spilling the hot beverage. Vitello breathed a sigh of relief as the two young women exchanged smiles and appreciative words. He picked up the folder again, "Travis Moore" glaring back up at him from this folder, too, while Claire backed away from the desk.

"Could I get you anything else, Ms. Clark? Mr. Vitello?" she asked. Vitello's mind reeled over the newest offer. He wished Claire would just leave them to their business.

"Nothing for me, Claire, thanks again," Ms. Clark answered, turning back to face the man opposite her.

"In a minute, Claire," he responded, waving her away without looking up from the folder. "So, Ms. Clark, I'm obviously going to have to talk to my client before I sign this. You understand."

"Certainly. I expected as much. Don't wait too long though, Mr. Vitello." She leaned forward and took her glasses off, brushing her dark hair out of her eyes. "If too much time passes, we may rescind this offer as well, and I assure you there will be no other offer."

Vitello smiled. "I understand. I will have Claire call the jail as well as Mr. Moore's family immediately to set up the meeting. Seven years and supervised release is indeed a long way from the original offer.

There was an audible gasp from the corner of the office. Both attorneys' heads swiveled once more toward the unidentified sound.

“Claire! What are you doing just standing there?” Vitello demanded. “Don’t you have work to do?!”

Claire turned bright red as she stumbled closer to the door. “No, sir, I asked and you said ‘in a minute.’ I thought you wanted me to wait, I’m so sorry! I’m leaving!” she said hurriedly, backing into a statue by the door. It teetered precariously on its pedestal.

“Don’t –!” Vitello started, arms outstretched. Both he and Ms. Clark stood up as though they would be able to reach the statue in enough time to stop it from shattering.

Claire whirled around and caught it just in time. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m so sorry! There, it’s fine!” she announced, out of breath. “Ms. Clark, I apologize for interrupting your meeting!” She checked one final time to see that the statue was now balanced and slammed the door shut. Not even a full second later, she peeked her head back in. “I’m sorry for that, too – the door slam,” she squeaked, slowly closing the door one final time.

The two attorneys remained standing, Vitello with his mouth wide open. Ms. Clark turned to face him with an amused sparkle in her eye and a hint of a smile on her face.

“Well, it seems you have a lot to take care of here, so I’ll get out of your hair.” She reached down to pack her other papers back into her briefcase. “Don’t forget my offer, Mr. Vitello. We won’t wait for your decision forever. I’m sure we’d all like to keep this out of the courts as much as possible, right?” She held out her hand across the desk again.

Vitello avoided the question. “I will definitely be speaking to Travis about our meeting.” He reached out and shook her hand. “Have a nice day, Ms. Clark. Claire will show you out,” he said, flashing her a smile.

“You do the same,” she answered. Vitello sat back down and opened a desk drawer, mind already on other matters. “And Mr. Vitello?”

He glanced up at her as she paused at the door, switching her briefcase from one hand to the other. “Yes, Ms. Clark?”

“Maybe send poor Claire on her lunch break? I’m sure she could use one after the day she’s been having so far.”

*The day Claire had been having?! He was the one who had no idea he’d had an appointment until 30 seconds before she arrived, almost slipped into shock from all the sugar the girl had put into his first cup of coffee, had his plans for going to trial blown up in his face, and had his incompetent intern nearly destroy a valuable family heirloom all in the course of two hours.*

Even so, he simply nodded in agreement. “You are absolutely right. I’ll be sure to send her right away.”

\* \* \*

Claire walked out of the bathroom, only slightly calmed down after the latest disaster. She paced back and forth in front of her desk, nervously waiting for her boss to march out of his office and fire her right on the spot now that Ms. Clark had gone. Claire thought about how she’d probably like working for her much more than staying with Vitello and making coffee for him and anyone else who met with him.

Suddenly, the door to Vitello’s office flew open.

“Claire!” he barked, striding toward her desk. She sat down and immediately stood back up, unsure of what was an appropriate position in which to be fired. She settled for wringing her hands and staring at the floor.

“Yes, sir?”

“I’m sending you on lunch. Take an hour. You obviously need a break,” he said, stopping in front of her desk, hands on his hips.

“You mean you don’t want me to leave?” she asked, surprised.

“Why would I – no, Claire. Just take your lunch.” He turned around to go back to his office.

“Sir!” Claire called after him. “I’ve actually already taken my lunch. I ate it here at my desk.”

Vitello spun on his heel to face her. “Oh. Well...I guess you can –”

“Would you like me to call the jail like you told Ms. Clark in your office?” she interrupted him.

She was anxious to prove she could do this one thing right.

Vitello did a double take. “You heard that?”

“Should I not have, sir?”

He ignored her question. “What else did you hear?” he demanded, staring directly into her eyes as if it were a matter of life and death.

Claire didn’t answer right away. *What didn’t he want her to hear?* “Just that they offered you another plea for seven and supervised release, sir,” she responded carefully. As soon as the words were out of her mouth, Vitello slapped his forehead. *What had she done wrong now?*

“Claire.” He took a step closer to her. “I need you to promise me you won’t ever repeat what you heard to anyone. Do you understand me?”

Claire looked up at him. “Mr. Vitello?”

“Promise me, Claire!” he urged.

She took a step back and felt a lump forming in her throat. “I swear I won’t,” she promised, not entirely sure why she was being sworn to secrecy. She watched as her boss ran his fingers through his hair and took up her position of pacing back and forth in front of her desk. “Why is it so important that I tell no one if you’re going to be taking the deal?”

“I’m not.” He continued pacing, stroking his chin and drawing Claire’s attention to his 5 o’clock shadow.

“You’re not...what?”

“Taking the deal, Claire!” His voice rose. “I’m not even going to tell Travis. And you’re not going to, either, understand?”

“But that’s an amazing deal! You’re insane not to take it!” Vitello stopped in his tracks and glared at her. *Great, Claire, she thought, insert foot in mouth, now.* She felt her cheeks getting hotter under his gaze.

He sighed, rubbing his eyes. “Could you just please keep quiet about this, Claire? I’m sorry to put you in this position, but this is important. Please?” he begged. He sunk into the chair next to her desk and gazed into her eyes, suddenly looking absolutely exhausted.

“Of course, sir,” she said. “Can I ask why it’s so important that no one finds out about the new offer?”

“I guess I might as well tell you the truth. No point in keeping it from you now. The truth is, Claire, that I need the publicity of a trial. I have it all planned out. I *need* people to know who I am,” he admitted.

“But, sir, there’s no guarantee you’ll win! And then you’ll have the publicity you want, but it won’t be the good kind. And – if you don’t mind my saying so – I don’t think many people would want you to represent them after a stint like this if you lose.”

“But I won’t! I won’t lose, Claire,” he insisted. “It’s a slam dunk case. You’ll see.” He got up from the chair and started back toward his office without giving her a chance to say anything further. “And Claire?” he paused before shutting the door behind him. She glanced up, expecting him to offer more assurance than a simple “You’ll see.”

“Could you bring me another cup of coffee? Four –”

Claire sighed. “Yes, Mr. Vitello. Four sugars, I got it.”

\* \* \*

“So, gentlemen, that’s where we stand. To summarize, I was completely right. The prosecution refused to do any better than 10 to 15 years.” Anthony Vitello slid a sheet of paper across the table to Travis Moore and his older brother, Eli. Eli quickly scanned the page, but Travis merely covered his face. “Our best chance is to go to trial. I am 100 percent confident the jury will let you off scot-free. You’re young. There’s no way they’ll send you away for 20 years,” he assured Travis, waiting for his response.

He lifted his head. “The prosecution really didn’t give you one last deal? We were so sure they were going to come up with another one. How could they...” he trailed off and put his head in his lap again.

Vitello hesitated before answering, but Eli jumped in, draping his arm across his younger brother. “Trav, don’t worry so much. Mr. Vitello said everything will be fine. I’m sure he knows what he’s talking about.” He glanced up across the table at the attorney and then looked at the young woman seated next to him. She was mildly attractive, but hadn’t looked at either brother the entire time they’d been sitting there. Eli gazed at her for a couple more seconds, willing her to say something comforting or to at least look at them. She kept her head down as if she were busy with something in her lap. She looked uncomfortable to be there, which was understandable; they were in the conference room at the county jail, after all.

“Look, Travis, your brother is right. There really is nothing to stress about. You should take it as a good sign; the prosecution wouldn’t offer you these deals if their case wasn’t weak. Sure, I thought they’d offer you a better one – and we would have jumped on it if they had – but we are prepared to go to court and get you off with little more than a slap on the wrist,” Vitello promised.

Travis exhaled and straightened up in his seat. “Well, let’s do it then. I’m tired of talking about it.”

“Excellent. Let me handle everything. It really is a slam dunk win. You won’t be sorry. You can take my word for it.”

### Author's Note

"Slam Dunk Win" was inspired by two recent Supreme Court cases: *Missouri v. Frye* as well as *Lafler v. Cooper*. Both cases were surrounding a defendant's rights during the plea bargaining process before going to trial. In *Missouri v. Frye*, the defense attorney did not tell the defendant about a plea offer from the prosecution, and the defendant was ultimately given a much longer sentence than had been offered as per the plea bargain. In *Lafler v. Cooper*, the attorney informed the defendant of the offer but advised against accepting it, resulting in the defendant in this case also being given a much harsher sentence. In response to both cases, the Supreme Court decided on March 21, 2012 that defendants do indeed have a constitutional right to effective assistance of counsel during the plea bargaining phase. The Court ordered the original plea be reoffered to the defendant in *Lafler* and for the final judgment of whether or not to accept the plea deal to be left up to the original trial court. Similarly, in *Missouri v. Frye*, the Court ordered the Missouri Court of Appeals to reconsider questions of whether or not the prosecution would have upheld the offer all the way to trial as well as whether or not the trial court would have accepted the terms of the plea before they made their final judgment.

## The Walking Corpse

I ain't never written in no journal my entire life. My pops said that shit's for girls and homos. I don't even know why I'm writing this right now. I got better things to do. Like get these cigarettes over to those dudes on D-block. I only been here 4 months, 12 days and 16 hours. And, no, I ain't counting. My roommate – bump that – my *cellmate* keeps track. He crazy. Says he been waiting for them to give him a roommate. He wanted somebody to talk to. I said I ain't nobody's roommate or *amigo* or bro or none of that sissy stuff. I heard on the outside how it works in here. I'm by myself. Can't trust nobody. I just gotta survive. And I will. Soon as I get some stuff to make a shank. Ain't nobody getting one up on JJ Cruz. Maybe when I get these cigs to D-block, we can make a trade. I heard you gotta stick with your own in here. *Puertorriqueños* live by that on the outside already anyway. I seen the Puerto Rican flag on that big dude's leg already. Once I give him these, I'm in. It's still every *hombre* for himself, but at least nobody else will touch me when they see me rolling with X and his crew.

\* \* \*

Today I realized just how old I am. Or, I should say, at least how old I appear to be. These two young kids walked by my table at dinner today and I overheard their conversation.

“Yo man, why's that old man here? What he do? Steal somebody's dentures?” He must have been new.

“Nah, man. That's old man Sid. He's been here since he was like 23 years old. He's practically 100 by now.”

I am nowhere near 100 years old. I am 71. My hair was bone white by the time I was 40, though, which is probably why these boys are under the impression that I've lived for an entire century. He was right about one thing; I *have* been in here since I was 23. Before that I was in and out of juvie until they finally decided to keep me there from 17 to 21. You'd think I'd have learned that old judge was serious. I

was a child. Just like all the ones walking around here like they're the kings of the playground. Like they're happy to be here. Or at least like they don't really mind it. It's as though they think as long as they "stick with their own," it will feel less like prison and more like they're still in their old neighborhoods. Well, guess what? Life on the inside's a lot different than that. That's what we call living a fantasy.

Sure, it's true it might seem that way when some of these kids are given 0-5, but ask those of us who have spent our entire adult lives inside. We'll tell you that the people on the outside who think they know everything about life inside are the same 0-5 punks who will probably end up right back for 5-10. Believe it or not, I used to try to help them. Get them to understand that they weren't invincible. That they needed to find something to live for while they still had their youth before they made an even bigger mistake and ended up here for the rest of their lives with nothing at all to live for. A couple listened. Most didn't. I'm proud to say I never saw the select few who did listen in here again. One even still writes to me on occasion, thanking me for the lessons I taught him and sending me pictures of his children and wife. He named his first son Sydney, after me.

Even though I've always known I would die in here, young men like him gave me something to live for when I'd all but given up. Times have changed now, though. These boys don't want to listen to an old timer anymore. They all respect me and leave me alone, but they think they know everything. I can't help people like that that. I guess I'll just enjoy my retirement for now. At least until someone worth my time comes along.

But I doubt that will happen. Here's hoping.

\* \* \*

They have a new lapdog now – X and his crew. He's a skinny little thing. Calls himself "Cruz" even though X and those other monsters call him "Little J." Twenty years ago, it would have broken my heart to see such a young guy get sucked into prison gangs, especially this one. He kept to himself at

first and was lucky enough to go unnoticed by the other gangs. Then one day, he suddenly had the same rough tattoo as the others – “100% Boricua” – and started strutting around with a nasty little smirk on his face. He could have just served his time quietly, maybe gotten released earlier on good behavior. Fat chance of that happening now. The men in those gangs rarely get out early. The only ones who do are the ones whose attorneys were able to – by the grace of God – get them out on a technicality. But those are few and far between.

I was in one of those gangs once. I wasn't always this calm and removed from it all. I won't go into detail except to say I did some pretty horrible things back then. It took me until I was almost 50 to ask myself what my life had become. I threw myself into the prison's education and mentoring programs at that point, and I've been involved ever since. I'll try any of them once if it helps pass the time. That's why I joined the one that gave us these journals. They said the purpose is to have a way to “reflect upon the situation at hand” as if it's a temporary pit stop in the big ol' journey of life. I've had almost 50 years to “reflect.” I don't need a journal to do it. Yet here I am writing in this thing as if it were a dear friend to whom I could reveal all my secrets. I wonder if Cruz actually uses his. That's where I first noticed him – at the second meeting. He'd just gotten here, and he looked terrified, no matter how hard an exterior he tried to present. I don't know what he's in for, but I know he's only 17 years old. He was waived up from juvenile court, though so it had to be something big.

After the meeting, I tried to talk to him; he reminded me so much of a younger version of myself. He didn't want to hear it. Said he didn't need the advice of a grandpa who'd be dead before dinner. Another one of the older guys in the group stopped him, warning him not to speak to me that way, but Cruz just stalked out of the room. I was about to just let him go and write him off as another lost cause, but at the last second, I followed him out of the room to suggest he come to the group I run. I still got the same hostile reaction, but he was slightly more respectful, having obviously taken the other man's threat seriously.

I'm not sure what it is about the kid that reminds me of myself, but I can't find it in myself to just give up on him. I'm not even sure if he'll ever come around, but I think I'll keep an eye on him anyway just in case.

\* \* \*

Some old man got on my case about not writing nothing in this stupid book last month, and I don't wanna have to knock the teeth out his mouth so here I am. Reflecting, or whatever they call it. I don't even have time for this. The only reason I even go to those meetings is 'cause it gets out the same time Javier finishes his drug class or whatever the hell it is. We handle business then. Right after he spends an hour letting them counselors believe that stuff is all in the past. Yeah right. Javi's the one everybody goes to when they want something.

Anyway, back to Grandpa Sid. I seen him watching me lately. Alejandro always says, "*Mira*, Little J, old man Sid likes you! Better be careful before he takes you back to his cell and lays his 'wisdom' on you!" I just flip him off every time and remind him of the time that Tranny Sheila winked at him and slapped him on the ass in front of the whole yard. That usually shuts his fat ass up.

But I don't talk to Sid. He always trying to make me talk in that stupid diary group. Asking me to read what I wrote or tell everyone something that made me think hard about my life in the last month. I used to just make stuff up 'til he caught me pretending to read off a blank page. Now I'm just gonna write whatever I want and then pretend it says something else. He ain't gonna catch me with no blank pages anymore.

Only problem is I still don't know what I'm supposed to write. Them dogs got me in here for armed robbery. Before that, I was in juvie for selling dope to an undercover cop. Is that enough info? My moms said I gotta problem with authority, but I don't. I just don't need the white man telling me what to do. Or calling me "*ese*" or "*Mexico*" and asking if I want a job cutting their grass. I should have cut *them*. Everybody else always said if I got locked up, I'd become somebody's bitch, but look at me now. Rolling

with X, Javi, Alejandro, David, and George like I said I would. Even got switched to D-block by telling them dumb COs that my first cellmate kept trying to get me to help him commit suicide. Everybody knows he crazy, so wasn't nobody surprised. I got moved a week later. Took all that crazy dude's crap with me, too. He barely got a pot to piss in now.

When X and them seen how easy it was for me to get that stuff, they started calling me to their table in the cafeteria. I get respect now. Them other dudes in here notice me with them and don't bother me. X runs the place even though he don't barely talk to nobody. Everybody looks down at the floor when he passes. Now they look at the floor when I pass, too. That's right, they can't touch this. Old man Sid still looks, though. Looks sad all the time like he about to cry. Or die. Probably 'cause he is. David says he's like 100 years old and nobody talks to him. Two weeks ago I said I didn't care and got up to ask him why he always staring, but X knocked me flat on my back and told me to leave Sid alone.

That was the first time he ever talked to me. I still don't know why everybody always so worried about being respectful to Sid. Ain't like he moves fast enough to pull a shank out on nobody. I could probably give him a head start and still kill him blindfolded. But I wouldn't tell X that. He's all riled up right now anyway. We're planning some huge drug deal in the cafeteria next week with some guys from C-block, and X says he's gonna personally strangle someone if it doesn't go down the way he wants it to. I'm gonna make sure I'm somewhere else for that. I'm all for my crew, but I ain't forgot it's still every man for himself here. And he sure as hell ain't about to strangle me.

\* \* \*

He notices me now. Sees me watching him in the yard, the cafeteria, during the journal reflection program. He always appears as though he wants to speak to me, even if only to ask why I watch him. Someone always either stops him, or he thinks better of it on his own. I wish he wouldn't. I still haven't given up on him even though he seems to be getting pulled deeper into the darker side of

prison life with each passing day. Gone is the quiet observer I discovered four months into his sentence. Cruz now follows X, Alejandro, and the rest like a little pet. He struts around giving attitude to COs and other inmates who he wouldn't dare to even look at if not for X's hulking presence right next to him. The others still call him Little J and make fun of him, but he hangs around anyway as though his being the butt of their jokes is more out of brotherly love than mere tolerance of a persistent pest. He's so young, so naïve. I wish I knew what all has led him here. Abuse? No education? No role models? Either way, I'm determined to get through to him. If I don't, they'll soon be tacking on additional time to his current sentence which they very well may have done already after that drug bust three days ago.

I'd heard murmurings of some big deal that was set to happen sometime this week. I suspected his crew was involved, but I'd hoped I was wrong, especially since I figured they'd get caught. To everyone else, the bust was a complete surprise, but I knew it was coming. People talk too much. So much of our days are planned out for us from the second we wake up to the second we all pretend to be asleep at light's out. So when a big event like this is planned not by COs, but by other inmates, people get excited to see how smoothly it goes down and whether there's a fight or a bust. Sure, at first, everyone's quiet and discreet about it, but as it gets closer, there gets to be so much chatter that you don't have to try very hard to overhear more than one conversation about it. No one in this whole facility speaks to me if they don't have to, so if I know about these things, you can rest assured that at least one CO knows. And that's all it takes.

\* \* \*

It happened in the morning. I don't know about everyone else, but I was asleep in my cell when I heard the commotion. It came from Javier's cell, a couple down from my own. I could barely distinguish what the COs were saying over Javier's deeply accented voice bellowing out in Spanish.

*“¿Oye, qué haces?! What the hell do you think you’re doing?!”* It sounded like things were being slammed around in his cell.

“Back away from the bed! Move, now!” I heard one CO yell.

Javier continued to shout, waking up even more men on the block. *“¡No me toques! ¡No me toques! Don’t touch me! ¡Put a madre!”* He kept cursing and yelling at the top of his lungs until what sounded like something being ripped apart filled the air. I’d guessed he’d hidden the drugs inside his mattress. I got out of my bed then to see if they would drag him by my cell or go to X or Cruz or Alejandro’s cell next, all of which were on the opposite side of my cell, even further away from Javier.

All the fuss continued even through Alejandro’s yelling to Javier asking what was happening. Eventually, they did drag a stone-faced Javier by. I could hear Cruz whining two cells over as he passed “Javi! Javi! You good?” I wished he’d keep his mouth shut and not give the guards a reason to search his cell where they’d probably at least find cigarettes. Soon after Cruz’s outburst, the guards stopped Javier in front of X’s cell.

“You work for this dirtbag, don’t you!?” one of the guards had yelled at Javier. He was silent. I tried to see down the hall, but they were too far.

*“Eso es la vida, hermano,”* X had said. That’s life, brother.

*“Yo sé. Lo que pasó, pasó, hermano,”* Javier responded. I know. What happens, happens, brother.

The guards yanked him away after that screaming for him to speak English before they got him deported to Mexico. Javier remained silent as he left D-block. All you could hear under the COs orders was the sound of the handcuffs and chains scraping against the floor tiles as they all left.

I could have sworn I heard sighs of relief from the others when the guards didn’t immediately return for them, but that turned out to be a very short-lived relief. Only three hours later, while most guys on our block were in their respective classes and programs, they raided the other cells, finding stuff

in every cell except X's, including in little JJ Cruz's cell. I wasn't around any of them when they were all taken away, but word is that it was as big a commotion as had happened with Javier, with Cruz putting up the biggest fight of them all. Maybe his stint in segregation will change his mind about my offer. As soon as he's out, I'm laying it on thick.

\* \* \*

Finally made it out the hole. Spent 27 days in there – all of us did. Except X. And Javier, too, but that's only 'cause he's still in there. They never put X in segregation. Something about how there wasn't no proof he was involved even though me, Javier, Alejandro, David and George all got caught. It's all bullshit. I'm starting to think maybe it ain't such a good idea to be down with all them. I'm not about to spend another month down there. You start thinking you going crazy and them COs know it. They joke on you all day, making you think you *are* crazy. But you can't even yell back at them or they ignore you and you don't get that one hour outside the cell at all. They just claim you refused to come out or that you was sleeping and wouldn't get up. And ain't nobody gonna come check to make sure they was telling the truth. Shit's rough.

Anyway, I been out for six days, and I keep to myself more now. I still eat with the crew, 'cause I can't have them coming after me for trying to bounce on them, but I stay out the yard and I don't hang around no more when I got programs to go to. Like this journal one. I talk to old man Sid now, too. He ain't so bad. Knows everybody's business, but he says that's what happens when you been here for 50 years. No one talks to him, he said, but don't nobody care if he overhears what they talking about, either. That's how he knew about the drug bust before it happened even though none of us told him about it. He says it's like he's invisible a lot of the time. I told him that's what I want, but he said it's too late! You believe that? He said X and the boys ain't never gonna let me go invisible. He told me that "once you're in, you're in for life. The only way you get out is if you live longer than everybody else in

your crew.” I said wasn’t nobody ever gonna have control over me like that. He just shrugged his wrinkly old shoulders.

I guess I’ll find out soon enough. X found out some new kid on the block told a CO about the drugs. Now, they all planning to jump him. Last time everyone talked about it, I didn’t say nothing. I just sat there ‘cause I don’t got no plans on helping them. I’m gonna hang around so I know when they plan on doing it, and then I’ll make sure I’m far away. I told Sid my plan, but he just looked sad and said “good luck.” That man always looks sad. One time I joked he was gonna die soon, but now he walks around like he really is about to die. I can’t ask him if he’s sick, though. He wouldn’t tell me the truth. He would lie and just say “JJ, this is the face of an old man. I hope you live to have this face yourself.” He says it all the time. Every time, I ask, “You want me to be sad when I’m old and dying?” He always says that he don’t want me to be sad, he just wants me to “live.” I don’t know what all that means, but I just figure he’s getting senile. I don’t want to end up like that. I’ll kill myself before I let myself go all crazy. Plus, I ain’t gonna be in here for 50 years like Sid. Nobody’ll be calling me “old man Cruz” when I’m 70 years old.

\* \* \*

Seems like his stint in segregation was good for JJ. They had him in there for four weeks, though, so I guess I shouldn’t be surprised. A lot of people come out changed after all that time in there. They just usually come out more...unstable and off their rockers rather than with more sense than they had going in. I’m still worried about the kid, though. He doesn’t seem to understand that he can’t simply just walk away from X and the others. They’ll kill him. Or at least rough him up so badly that he’ll be begging to go back to segregation. I am glad, however, that he’s realized he made a mistake in choosing to buddy up with them in the first place. It makes me believe there may be hope for him after all. He’s already started participating more often in the journal program and has joined two of the other groups I’m in, but I’d bet X, Javier, Alejandro and the others have no idea. No one in any of the groups we’re in

together is from D-block. I'm pretty sure that's why he's so willing to participate. I didn't even have to try very hard to make it happen; he sort of just came to me.

Regardless, it's fine with me. He's a good kid. He keeps saying he wishes he were invisible, the way I feel most of the time, but that's not going to happen. The best he can hope for is to stay out of trouble and wait to be released or for the other guys to either die or get transferred. It sounds harsh, but that's the reality. I only hope he doesn't find himself in a worse position should they all disappear in one way or another. It's a lonely life. I've told him about some of my experiences with prison gangs in the past, careful to leave out anything he might interpret to be my giving him permission to do certain things simply because I've done them. I explained to him that sooner or later, everyone from the outside stops writing and visiting and that even his "*amigos*" on the inside die off. Everyone I used to run around with in here died from disease, drugs, or was killed by someone else decades ago. I'm all that's left, but even I won't be here forever. I'm not as healthy as I once was, but whenever I try to bring the issue up to JJ, he changes the subject or jokes that I'm going to outlive him and everyone else in the entire prison.

I don't mean it all to depress him or drive him to suicide – it's actually quite the opposite. I wish I had someone around years ago to warn me what was in store. You age quickly inside, and life on the outside goes on without you. If you don't know to expect it, it can do serious damage. Some, myself included, resort to attempting suicide so as not to feel the never-ending, sharp pangs of loneliness, while others let themselves go completely and lose their minds. I didn't have some frail old man trying to teach me these hard lessons, but I'm doing my best to teach them to JJ. He may not want to accept it, but I've only got but so long left here, and we both need to know he'll be able to manage on his own once that day comes.

\* \* \*

Old man Sid wasn't at our group this morning. Made me nervous, but you won't hear me admit that to anyone. He been looking real bad lately, but no one notices except me. I heard some dudes in

the cafeteria the other day call him a walking corpse. I wanted to beat them with my tray, but I wasn't trying start an all-out riot. X and them already pissed at me – have been since I got out of seg. If I start a fight, I don't know that they'd back me up now. We still eat together, but I know they talk about me when I walk away. Don't matter to me as long as they don't try no funny stuff.

I ain't helped them jump the snitch last month, though, so they might come after me next. Think I'll just chill with Sid 'til they got time to cool off. He got so many stories. Last week he told me about how he was supposed to go to some big university and study history, but he never got to go 'cause he got locked up. I asked how he was gonna go to college when he ain't never graduated high school, but he said he would have figured it out. I believe him, too. I never thought about no college before he told me that story. I stopped going to school when I was 15 to sell dope full time and I ain't looked back since. Not 'til now, anyway. Now I got Sid brainwashing me – telling me to behave so I can get out early, making me write in diaries like a little girl, talking about college and all that. He knows everything, and he tells good stories, but I still think he's crazy.

I don't really feel like writing in this anymore. Think I'll go find crazy Sid. Maybe he slept through our group today. Maybe he'll be at the next one this afternoon. All I know is he better not be in no infirmary.

\* \* \*

Haven't felt too great these last couple months. Doctors don't know what's wrong with me, but I do. I heard one say cancer, but that's not it. That's just a word they throw around here when there's no preexisting condition like AIDS or diabetes or when they don't have an obvious answer like a stab wound. The truth is I'm just dying. I'm 71 years old, and it's probably just my time to go. Now that I think about it, it was probably my time to go 20 years ago. I've just held on for JJ and the others I've grown fond of over the years. Lord knows I'm ready to go. Didn't expect it to come now, though, I have to admit. I don't know what I'm going to tell JJ when he finds out. If he ever comes.

\* \* \*

That old fart *is* in the infirmary. I was outside the door yesterday trying to decide whether or not I should ask if he was there when Tranny Sheila came out. Some big gorilla from A-block raped and beat her so bad she was unconscious for three days. When she saw me standing there, she asked if I was there to see my pops.

I said, "My pops ain't in here, Sheila. He's not a fuck-up like me."

She rolled her eyes and sucked her teeth at me. "Not your real pops, dumbass. Your Grandpa Sid."

"Sid ain't in there either, Sheila. Don't you got somewhere to be now?" I'd asked her, annoyed.

"Why you so worried about where I gotta be, Little J?" She walked around me. "You want some of Big S?" Then that tranny winked and flicked her tongue at me. I busted through the infirmary door she'd just come out of just to get away from her.

Sid was in the bed right in front of me when I slammed the door shut. I walked to the side of his bed and stared at him. He *did* look like a corpse. I shook him a couple times and called his name, but he was stiff like a corpse, too. Some doctor came in, then, asking why I was there, so I left, but I seen his eyes open right before I shut the door.

I ain't gone back since then, and that was two months ago. I ain't like hospitals on the outside and I sure as hell don't like them in here either. I been passing by the infirmary every day, but I don't ever go in. Four days ago, the lady that kicked me out the first time I went in gave me Sid's journal. Said the old man told her it belonged to "the young man who comes by that door every day but doesn't come in." I still ain't open it.

## 25 years later

Wow, I haven't cracked this old thing open in a long time. I don't usually like to read all the old stories about Sid. Takes me back to a dark place. I didn't even remember the last time I'd written anything in here until I read the whole thing cover to cover. To fill in the blanks, old man Sid died two days after that doctor had given me his journal – two days before my last journal entry prior to this one. They didn't know what he died from, but then again, when did they ever? I'm sure Sid knew, or at least thought he knew. He would have said something along the lines of "JJ, this is the death of an old man" and told me how he hoped I lived to be that old. I hadn't understood then, but I eventually got what he had been trying to say.

It took me a long time to open Sid's journal back then once I'd heard the news. At first, I pretended nothing had happened. I went back to hanging out with Alejandro and George. Javier had gotten caught with drugs twice more and was transferred. David and X were actually both killed in a riot in the yard a year after Sid died. It was a mess. Anyway, I kept getting into trouble, and it all caught up with me. They added another ten years to my sentence, which is why I'm still here at all. After that happened, I took the same path as Sid. Got involved in all the education programs and learned a trade. Took over the journal program, too, but never again wrote in mine until now. When I finally opened Sid's journal, a yellowed, torn picture of some young man fell out onto my bed. On the back, he'd written "Old Man Sid, age 26." It took me an entire year to read the whole journal; it was too painful to read it all at once.

When I finally got to the last page, I could barely read it. His motor skills had obviously deteriorated at the end. The writing was slanted and sometimes barely legible as though he didn't have the strength to press the pen down to the page. Once I'd figured out what it said, the three lines nearly brought a tear to my eye, but they'd also made me laugh.

*JJ – You're better than you think you are.*

*Live long, live well, and don't turn into a walking corpse like me.*

*Old Man Sid*

That was Sid for you, teaching lessons to his dying day and from beyond the grave. Lessons I knew he'd want me to pass on. I hadn't met anyone worth my time, though, until today – that's what caused me to dust these journals off. His name was Antonio, and he was 20 years old. He'd chosen a horrible crowd to hang around even faster than I had. Like the 17 year old version of myself, he's also been placed into the journal reflection program. I'd missed that meeting because I was meeting with the parole board, but another man in the group told me Antonio reminded him of me when we were younger. I guess I'll have to get to him before the parole board decides to release me because I have no intention of staying here long enough to become a walking corpse.

We can't all be like you, Sid.