THE CITY WITHIN

By

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ONE

Twenty-twenty Foresight

"This is the last one." Daniel Owens stretched the dollar bill and held it up to the dining room light. "Good news. It's real."

Grace reached across the table to take his hand in hers.

He lowered the single mark of cash and set old George on a pile of unopened envelopes—power and water bill, rent bill, phone bill. "There." He entwined his fingers with his wife's and smiled at her. "Now they're covered."

Grace breathed a laugh and wiped tears from her eyes. "We'll make it. We always do."

Daniel pushed the envelopes to the side and propped up his face with his elbow. He let his eyes savor his wife, swimming through her locks of brown hair, wandering among the few freckles dotting either side of her nose. Drew Barrymore, he thought, only prettier.

She mimicked his actions, resting her elbow on the dining table and tilting her head into her palm. Her hazel eyes danced with his blue eyes and they played footsie

between their chairs.

He didn't feel like a thirty-two-year-old with three daughters, practically no money, and a crummy job as a garbage truck driver—not in these moments when he was alone with Grace and they flirted like they were still in high school.

"Did you think it would be this hard?" she asked, rubbing the back of his hand with her thumb.

"Actually," Daniel said, "I figured we'd win the lottery the year after we got married and then buy a mansion on snob hill and walk around in our bath robes and slippers all day, sipping martinis and gossiping about our neighbors."

Grace leaned forward and kissed him on the lips. "I'd rather be right here with you any day."

"Even if I come home smelling like garbage?"

She touched his cheek, her soft hand gliding over his stubble. "Even if you come home smelling like garbage." She kissed him again, and he pulled her out of her chair and onto his lap.

Grace made tiger sounds, snapping her teeth and nibbling on his lip.

He was the luckiest garbage truck driver in the world.

She reached down and started to pull off his shirt.

"I have to get up early," he said.

She knew his excuse was part of the game, so she played her role by sitting back on his knees and pouting. "You gonna go to bed and leave me all alone?"

"You won't be alone. Jester will keep you company."

Grace looked over her shoulder into the living room where their calico cat was

perched on the back of the couch. The feline opened one eye, stared at them, yawned, then started licking himself.

Grace turned back to him, crossing her arms and putting on a glare that could peel an orange. Daniel laughed and pulled her close again. “Have I ever told you how beautiful you are?”

“You think you can win back my heart with your tired lines?”

He reached up and gently touched the back of her ear. “I’m Peter Parker and you’re my radioactive spider.”

A hint of a smile played at the side of her lips, but she tamed it with a frown. “You’ll have to do better than that if you want to know my secret.”

He raised his eyebrows. “Oh, so now you have a secret?”

“Of course I do. And I’m not going to tell you what it is.”

“I see how it’s gonna be. Make me work for it.”

She adjusted the collar of his polo shirt then looped the top button closed. “Don’t you know that the best things in life never come easy?”

“First hand,” he said. Three weeks after Daniel met Grace he knew that he wanted to marry her. The notion had scared her half to death, and during their two years of dating they must have broken up and gotten back together at least a dozen times. Then one day, out of blue it seemed, Grace told him that she was madly in love with him and that she could never be happy with anybody else.

He gave her a ring a month later and they were pronounced man and wife the summer following their engagement.

With his shirt buttoned up to his neck and Grace still fidgeting with his collar,

Daniel reached up and unbuttoned the top of her blouse. “You know we’ve been married for almost ten years?”

She swatted his hand. “Slow down there, cowboy. You think your charms will work better if I’m not wearing a shirt?”

He grinned. “Okay. How’s this? You’re the pot of gold and the end of my rainbow.”

Her eyes widened. “Daniel! Keep it PG. The girls might still be awake in their room.”

“So what,” he said, moving down her shirt and undoing the second button. “Let them hear. Let them know that Mommy and Daddy love each other more than anything in the world.”

She wasn’t stopping him from undoing her shirt, but he hadn’t broken her playful stubbornness yet. She said, “You still haven’t taken care of that bee’s nest in the back of the house.”

“What bee’s nest?” He knew exactly the one she was talking about.

“The one you said you’d knock down a week ago.”

“I’ll take care of it before I go to work in the morning.”

She grabbed him by the collar and pulled him close. “You better.”

He gripped her shirt and pulled her closer. “I will.”

They faced off for a moment, then she smiled. Oh, how he loved her.

“Even if they cut off the power,” she said, “even if we lose our house, I love you. You’re my man, and you work hard to take care of us.” She fingered the top button of his shirt and pulled it open. “Now lets go to the bedroom so you can show me some of your

moves . . . Spider-Man."

Their plans were interrupted by the sound of a gunshot outside, followed by a scream.

Daniel and Grace stared at each other, eyes wide, listening.

Someone screamed, "Help!" which was followed by another gunshot.

Grace leapt off Daniel and he was up in a flash, darting for the front door and throwing it open. He was halfway across the front yard when he saw the body in the street. An amber glow from the streetlamp circled the man like a spotlight. He was flat on his back. Something was pooling on the pavement beneath him.

Daniel turned to see Grace standing in the doorway. "Call nine-one-one," he said. "It looks like he was shot."

Grace rushed back into the house and Daniel hurried out to the road. The man who had been shot rolled over onto his side, facing away.

When Daniel was near enough to see what the injured man was wearing, he stopped cold. Blue jeans, green polo shirt with thin white stripes, brown walking shoes—the exact same outfit that Daniel was wearing right now.

Odd.

A cold breeze whispered over the street as Daniel crept closer. The man's face was pointing away, but he could hear him moaning.

"Hold still," Daniel said. "You were shot. We're calling an ambulance."

He glanced down both directions of the street, looking for any sign of the shooter, but there was no one wearing a black trench coat and hurrying off into the night, no get-away car speeding over the pavement.

The man moaned. “Help . . .”

The voice was familiar.

Daniel knelt down behind him, still unable to see the face. He noticed a white bag of frozen green beans lying on the pavement. There was also an open cell phone.

“Hold on,” Daniel said, “an ambulance is coming.”

There was a square bulge in the back pocket of the Levi’s. A wallet.

Daniel carefully wedged his fingers into the pocket and pulled out the wallet. It was black leather and worn at the corners. Looked like any normal wallet—except for the two letters stamped into one side: D.O.

Daniel felt his heart beating in his ears. Those were his initials. They were carved into his wallet as well.

Fingers trembling, he pulled open the billfold and recognized the silver debit card, the video store card, the green library card. He pulled up the familiar flap on the left side and found his driver’s license. This was his wallet.

Impossible.

He’d changed clothes at work, packing his Waste Management uniform into a plastic bag to help contain the smell, then upon arriving home he’d set his wallet on top of his dresser. Like he always did. It was sitting there right now.

But then it wasn’t because he was holding it in his hands.

Curious, Daniel peeled apart the money flap of the wallet to find a pair of one hundred dollar bills and a bundle of twenties. Around four hundred bucks. If this was his wallet, there must be some mistake, because he hadn’t carried that much dough in months.

The injured man was wearing a watch on his right wrist, and it looked exactly like Daniel's watch. He bent around to see the face of the timepiece. The time was correct—8:18 PM. But the date looked wrong. Wasn't it the twenty-first? The watch said it was the twenty-second.

The man moaned again, and it sounded weaker. He was fading. Dying.

The clothes, the wallet, the watch . . . Daniel had the sudden feeling that none of this was a bizarre coincidence.

The injured man suddenly went limp and Daniel could sense the cold presence of death. Trembling and sweating, his heart racing, Daniel rolled the man onto his back so that the face stared up into the streetlamp.

There was no mistaking it. There was no denying it. Daniel Owens was looking at Daniel Owens.

And Daniel Owens was dead.

"Daniel!"

He spun from the dead man—himself—to see Grace hurrying down the front steps of their house and across the lawn. "The ambulance is com—" Her eyes flashed to the street behind him.

The blood drained from her face. She was seeing the dead man, the dead Daniel Owens.

"Where is he?" Grace asked.

Daniel whirled and looked at the asphalt. The body was gone. There wasn't even a stain from the blood.

Grace came to stand beside him and reached out and gripped his hand. "You're

shaking," she said. "What's going on? Where's the body?"

Daniel wiped his forehead. Was it a vision? A hallucination? "He's gone."

"What do you mean *he's gone*? What happened?'

He looked at her and took both of her hands into his. "Grace, something just happened. Something really . . . really weird."

A fly hovered above them, smacking into the streetlamp, buzzing in a circle, smacking into the streetlamp.

"Daniel, you're scaring me."

He swallowed. "I saw myself. I was the man on the road. I was dead."

Grace blinked three times. "What do you mean?"

"I mean the man who got shot was me! I saw his face—*my* face. He had my wallet with my driver's license. He was wearing my clothes. He . . . he was dead."

She studied him for a moment, weighing his outlandish claim. She flipped open the phone and punched in three numbers.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"Canceling the ambulance."

"You believe me?"

"Yes," Grace said into the phone. "I called just a moment ago reporting an accident with a man getting shot. Yes. I'm sorry, I was mistaken. No, we don't need an ambulance. No need to send a police officer. I think it was just some kids playing a prank. Yes. I'm very sorry. Thank you." She hung up and crossed her arms.

He waited for her to say something. "Do you believe me?" he asked.

Grace bit her lip. "Are you sure that it was you?"

"Yes."

She shook her head and looked down at the empty spot on the road. "You were dead? It was really you?"

Daniel stepped forward and wrapped her in his arms. "I'm not dead now. It was just—" Just what? He had no idea what he'd just seen.

"Why?" Grace asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Why would you see yourself dead?"

His watch suddenly beeped, signaling that he had one hour to get to bed if he had any hope of making his 4:30 A.M. wake-up call.

The watch.

He pulled back and stared Grace in the eyes. "It was a vision. It was the future." The sense of the matter rolled over him like a wave. He ran a hand through his hair, blowing out a breath of air. "It makes sense. It makes total sense."

"What does?" Grace asked. "You saw the future?"

It sounded so ludicrous when she said it. "His watch—my watch." Daniel shook his head. "The watch that the dead man was wearing."

"You," she said. "The dead man who was you?"

"Yes. The dead man who was me was wearing my watch, but the date was different. It was the twenty-second." He waited for it to register. "It was tomorrow."

Grace stared at him without blinking. She chewed on a fingernail.

He breathed and felt his heart pounding like a racing horse. "Say something!"

She inhaled, closed her eyes, opened her eyes, let out the breath. "What does this

mean? If this is real, and you saw yourself. Dead. What does this mean?"

"It means—" He pulled his trembling fingers into fists. "It means I'm going to die. This time tomorrow, right here in front of our house, I'm going to die."

TWO

Helpless

Headlights turned a corner down the road and cast them in twin beams of pale light.

Daniel walked toward the house, pulling Grace by the hand. “We have to stop it,” he said. “We have stop me from dying.”

“You really think the vision was true?”

The fact that she wasn’t calling the cops right now and telling them to bring a straight jacket was like a breath of peace through his rattled nerves. “This is crazy, Grace. I know this is totally insane.”

She raised her eyebrows.

“I don’t know how this happened,” he said. “But I know it’s true. I’m going to die tomorrow night at 8:18 PM. Right out there on the road.”

“Do you think it was God?”

“What?”

“Do you think the vision was from God?”

"I don't know. Maybe. It doesn't matter. It's going to happen, and we have to figure out how to stop it."

He hurried up the front steps and threw open the door. Kristen, his oldest daughter, was standing in the living room. "Dad? What's going on?"

Daniel felt a sudden rush of panic at the sight of her. If he couldn't stop the future, then twenty-four hours from now his twelve-year-old daughter was going to be fatherless.

He went to her and pulled her up into his arms.

"Dad?"

"Hug me," he said. "Give me a big ol' hug."

She tightened her arms around him. "Mom, why are you crying?"

Grace came into the living room and joined the hug.

"What is it?" Kristen asked. "I thought I heard someone scream outside."

Daniel set her down on the couch and knelt in front of her. She had her mother's features: cute little nose, rosy cheeks, and a smile that could melt the sun.

Daniel had wanted a boy from the moment they'd found out that Grace was pregnant—but when they'd learned that they were having a girl, he suddenly wanted nothing else than to hold little Kristen in his arms, his baby girl, his daughter.

When she turned twelve, she stopped calling him Daddy. Now he was Dad. He supposed it was her way of asserting herself as a young woman now, and a part of him withered inside at the thought of his little girl growing up and not calling for Daddy when she was scared or hurt.

They'd let her watch too much reality TV growing up, and now she was always paranoid about something bad happening. If Daniel told her the truth—that he'd just seen

a vision of his death twenty-four hours from now—Kristen would freak.

His hand looked big next to her face as he brushed back a lock of her curly hair. “Don’t worry, sweetie. Everything is fine.”

Her forehead wrinkled. “You’re lying.” She looked at Grace. “Mom, what’s going on? Why are you crying?”

Grace touched their daughter’s hand and glanced at Daniel. “Money’s just tight right now, dear. Your father and I are just a little worried that we won’t be able to pay all of the bills this month.”

Money wasn’t the reason that her and Daniel were so shook up, but the fact remained that he had no idea how they were going to make the rent this month. They needed a hundred dollars in two days to keep the lights on. Rent was due at the end of the week—another eight hundred bucks.

They’d been making it before the economic crash a year ago. He’d been working for a construction company as a framer and making decent money. Grace was teaching at the girl’s private school, and they were doing just fine.

In one month the school shut down and Grace lost her job, the construction company Daniel had been working for had to lay off fifty percent of its employees, the transmission went out on their van, and their rent went up another hundred dollars.

They referred to it now as the Month of Doom.

Daniel couldn’t find another job for three weeks, and they almost lost everything. Finally he landed a position working for Spokane City Waste Management, driving a garbage truck.

Oh yes. The career of dreams.

At the time he didn't care—it was a job and it would bring in enough money for them to get by. Hopefully things would swing back around and Grace could find work and they could get back on their feet.

Nearly twelve months later he was still tipping dumpsters and Grace was still handing in applications. Every month they were able to keep food on the table and the lights burning was another miracle.

Daniel was beginning to feel that his quota of miracles was running out.

Kristen crossed her arms and leaned back into the couch. "You should let me help."

"No," Daniel said. "We've talked about this. You earned that money and you keep it."

"We'll figure it out," Grace said. "We always do. Now go back to bed. There's nothing wrong."

Kristen wasn't convinced. "I heard somebody screaming."

"It was the neighbors," Daniel said. "They were having a fight." He was surprised how easily the lie rolled off his tongue. He was even more surprised when Kristen accepted it.

"Oh," she said, poking a finger through a hole in her pajama pants. "Okay."

Daniel stood up from the carpet. "Come on. Back to bed. You've got school tomorrow."

Kristen stood, slid her hands into her pockets, and slippered back down the hall. Watching her go, Daniel had the sudden fear that he wasn't going to see her again. He would be gone for work before she got up, and if his vision of the future came true, he

would die out there on the road.

"Kris," he called.

She turned. "Yeah, Daddy?"

Daddy. He swallowed back tears and, not sure what else to do, raised his hand and waved. "Have a good sleep, sweetie."

"You too." She went into her bedroom and was gone.

Daniel dropped down onto the couch and Grace nestled in beside him. An empty TV reflected them from across the room. A police siren blared somewhere in the city. A dog barked.

Images were flying through Daniel's brain—flashes of the dead man in the road, of his daughters, of Grace. Was this really happening? Was he really going to die?

Grace traced a finger up and down his forearm. "Can we talk about it?" Her eyes were puffy with tears and she was biting her lip the way she did when she was nervous.

He pulled her head into his chest and then stretched out on the couch and stared up at the ceiling. He stroked her hair and she listened to his heart.

"What if we can't stop it?" Grace asked.

He'd been wondering the exact same thing. "There has to be a way. I mean, maybe I saw the vision because I'm *supposed* to stop it."

"How? What are we supposed to do? Fly out of the country?"

It wasn't a bad idea. If he was halfway across the world tomorrow night when 8:18 tolled, then he would be safe. Wouldn't he?

It didn't matter anyway—they had one dollar to their name. There was no way they could afford airfare.

"I'm just going to go through the day like normal," he said. "Get up, go to work, come home. Why would I be out on the road at that time of night anyway?"

Grace sniffed and wiped her tears onto his shirt. "I just feel so helpless. Like . . . like there's a fire coming to destroy our house and all we can do is stand by and watch." She shuddered and he gripped her tighter.

"Shhh." He stroked her hair and stared at the ceiling. "We'll be okay." How many times had he said that?

He heard his cell phone ringing from the bedroom. Who would be calling at this time of night?

"Are you going to get that?" Grace asked.

"I don't want to talk to anybody else right now. I just want to be here with you."

Sobs overcame Grace and she buried her face in his chest to mask the sound from their children. Tears slowly pooled in Daniel's eyes and ran down his cheeks. He held Grace close and whispered, "We'll be okay. We'll be okay."

It felt like a lie.

THREE

Teasing Fate

Daniel Owens was awake when the alarm chirped at 4:30 A.M. He rose from the bed, clicked off the alarm, and pulled on jeans and a polo shirt.

Grace watched him from the bed, her eyes swollen after last night's tears. They had made love, and it had felt like the first and last time. She had cried so long afterward, and he had held her in the darkness, held her and said nothing.

When she was finally asleep, he pulled the covers up to her shoulders and then lay on his back, contemplating death. He'd decided a hundred times during the night that he wouldn't get up in the morning and go to work. He'd tie himself to the bed, or drive north through Washington State until he came to Canada—whatever, as long as he was nowhere near his house come 8:18 P.M.

But then it felt like he was just teasing fate, because somehow, some way, he would be out there tonight. He would be walking on the road in front of his house and then somebody would shoot him dead.

Who? Was it going to be an accident? Or was someone going to pick him on

purpose?

He had no enemies to speak of, not really. He was known to be stubborn from time to time, but no more than anyone else. His coworkers liked him, people at church liked him—everybody thought he was a pretty decent guy.

And that's what he was: a decent guy. Women didn't notice him at the grocery store and then circle back around the aisle for a second glance. Other men wouldn't be jealous of his tan or his haircut or his build. No. He was decent. Normal.

He drove a garbage truck. He liked watching movies and eating barbequed hamburgers. He liked spending time with his wife and kids. He preferred Coke to Pepsi.

There was no groundbreaking career in his future. No four-year degree in his past that promised some lofty position with fat 401K's and paid vacations to Fiji. He'd started working construction the summer after he'd graduated from high school. It was good money and at the time there didn't seem to be a reason to go to college.

Looking back, he didn't think he'd change a thing. Sure they were on hard times now—everyone was. But he had a beautiful family and he'd learned to appreciate the simple things. He was happy.

Pulling on his work boots, Daniel looked across the room at Grace. She was staring in his direction, but she seemed dazed, as though sleeping with her eyes open. Her makeup was smeared and her hair was in a tangled mess, but she was stunning.

She was more than he deserved, more than any man could ever really deserve.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

He finished tying his boots and walked over to her. "I'm going to work."

She grabbed his hand. "Please don't."

Daniel knelt down and kissed her on the forehead. “I get home hours before it happens. We’ll load up the kids and go on a drive. A long dive. We’ll be miles away from here.”

“Do you really think we can stop this?”

“I don’t know. But I can’t sit around here thinking about it. I’m going to live this day like I would any other.” He forced a smile.

Grace squeezed his hand and tears rolled down her cheeks onto her pillow. “Call me. At lunch. When you’re coming home. I need to hear your voice.”

He kissed her on the lips. “I will. I love you.”

“I love you too.”

He was out of the house ten minutes later. He didn’t say goodbye.

FOUR

The Moment

Driving a garbage truck was a mindless job. The modern trucks were equipped with a McNeilus autoreach arm that was controlled from the driver's seat. Unless somebody had piled extra trash around the can, Daniel didn't even have to leave the cab.

He took his usual route, passing through sleepy neighborhoods where dew was still wet on the grass. Stopping every ten feet or so, he would come up beside a garbage can, reach out the mechanical arm and clamp onto the can like crab pinchers. Then the arm raised the can from the pavement and deposited the trash over the side of the truck. Set the can down, move down the road, and repeat.

Mindless and thankless. He actually looked forward to the times when he had to hop down from the cab and manually handle any extra bags of garbage.

This morning was different—he didn't want to get out of the cab, he didn't want to drive. If this was really his last day on earth, what was he doing driving around a garbage truck? He should be with his family. He should drive to Seattle to see Dad, to try and mend their relationship before it was too late.

The cell phone in his pocket vibrated, signaling an incoming call. He pulled the truck to a stop beside a trash bin, then fished out his phone. He didn't recognize the number.

Wedging the phone between his cheek and his shoulder, and trying to see out the side mirror to work the autoreach arm, he said, "This is Daniel."

"Dan. It's Mike."

He hadn't properly lined up the truck with the can, and the arm knocked into the side of the container, spinning it off balance. The can toppled to the pavement and trash bags spilled out onto the ground.

"You there?" Mike asked.

Daniel held the phone with his left hand and dropped out of the cab. "Yeah. What's going on, Bro?"

"Dan. I'm . . ."

One of the bags in the can wasn't tied. Bits of rotten food and other garbage were scattered across the road and under the truck.

"I've got myself in a mess," Mike said.

Daniel scooped up a handful of garbage and dropped it into the bag. "What's wrong?"

"I did something stupid."

This wasn't the first time Mike had called asking for his big brother to bail him out—in fact, he seemed to be making a habit of it. Mike had been a surprise baby, coming nearly twelve years after Daniel was born. Mom and Dad spoiled him rotten, laxing on discipline and giving the kid anything he wanted.

Not anymore, they said. Mike was on his own now. Which meant Daniel was the call-guy for Mike's fallouts.

"What'd you do?" Daniel asked.

"It was stupid. I'm an idiot."

Bending to pick up an empty can of tomato sauce, Daniel said, "So what's new?"

"I was drinking. I got drunk."

Daniel noticed the corner of a wallet sticking out of a pile of moldy yogurt.

Mike said, "I don't know what I was thinking. There was this girl at the party."

Daniel rescued the wallet from the rotten yogurt and wiped it clean. He glanced up the driveway at the house to which the garbage can belonged.

"So we started talking. I was so drunk."

The lawn was freshly mowed and edged with bark-coated flowerbeds. Wicker pots hung from the top beam of the front porch, pink pansies spilling down their sides.

"I think she was drunk too. We were talking, you know? Having a good time."

The phone once again cruxed between his shoulder and cheek, and the wallet in his hand, Daniel tried to peer through the front windows of the house. He didn't see anyone inside.

"We left the party together," Mike said. "We went back to her parent's house."

Why would somebody throw away their wallet? They wouldn't—that was the point. It must have been an accident.

He remembered a time when Rebecca had found his wallet on the table and they searched the whole house and didn't find it until Daniel went to take out the trash and found it right where little Becca had left it: in the garbage.

"We snuck into her room," Mike said. "I was so drunk. Man. I don't know what I was thinking."

The obvious thing to do was to go and knock on the front door and give the owners the wallet. It was the right thing to do.

So why was he still standing there among the garbage, holding the wallet in one hand and a toilet paper roll in the other?

"We got a little carried away. It was stupid. I fell asleep."

Glancing at the house again, not seeing a silhouette watching him through the window, Daniel put the toilet paper roll into the trash bag and then flipped open the wallet.

"Her dad came up to her room in the morning. He . . . oh man. I thought he was gonna kill me."

Inside of the wallet there was a driver's license for a seventy-two-year-old man by the name of Richard Beagle. There was also the usual collection of credit cards, grocery store rewards card, video rental card, and—

There were three one hundred dollar bills in the cash pocket of the wallet.

"Her dad said he was gonna call the cops, but I snuck out of the house before they got there. Dan . . . the girl . . . she was sixteen, man."

Daniel heard the word *sixteen* and almost choked. Mike was what—twenty?

"I'm scared, Dan. I'm really screwed up right now."

"Where are you?" Daniel asked.

"I'm at this little gas station, using their phone."

"What city are you in?"

"Sandpoint."

"You're in Idaho?"

"It's where we had the party. Oh man. I'm scared, Dan. Can you . . . can you come and get me?"

"Mike." Daniel inhaled a breath and let it out through his nose. "Listen, you're going to get yourself in more of a mess if you run from the cops."

"I know. But I can't just—I mean, she wanted it. It's not like I forced her or anything."

"It doesn't matter. She's a minor. Her dad could press charges for statutory rape."

Mike swore on the other end. "This is so screwed up. I don't know what to do. I can't go to jail."

"You need to go back to her house and talk with her dad."

"No way! Seriously, I thought the dude was gonna kill me."

"Well, Mike, you messed with his daughter. If I found a twenty-year-old in Kristen's room, I'd want to kill him too."

"Yeah but Kris is twelve. This girl was sixteen."

"Wouldn't make any difference. I'd still want to kill him."

Mike swore again. "I can't go back there. I can't. I need you to come get me."

"I can't come get you. Sandpoint is over an hour's drive from Spokane. I'm working."

"Please, Dan. I know this is all my fault—"

"Yes it is."

"I know I'm always asking you to bail me out—"

"Yes you are."

"I'm done, man. I'm done with all this. I'm gonna change."

Daniel rolled his eyes.

"Please," Mike said. "I'm really scared."

While Daniel thought there would be nothing better for Mike than to do some time behind bars, he was still his brother. He wanted to punch him in the face, but he was still his brother.

"*If* I come and get you," Daniel said, "I'm not going to help you run away. I'm going to take you back to the girl's father and we're going to sit down and you're going to apologize."

"Okay."

"I mean, you're going to get on your knees and beg for this guy not to kill you. You hear me?"

"Yeah. Totally. I got you."

"Stop talking like an idiot, Mike. You sound like you're thirteen."

"Sorry. I'm sorry. You're right. I'll offer him my soul in exchange for my freedom."

"I wouldn't go *that* far, but yeah, something like that."

"Okay. So . . . are you gonna come get me?"

Daniel gritted his teeth. Oh, the things he did in the name of family. "I can't come until I'm done with work. I'll have to stop and get some gas." How was he going to pay for that? "Where are you going to be?"

"I'll go down to the city beach. I'll hide in a porta-potty or something."

"It's going to be hours before I can get there."

"That's okay."

"This is the last time, Mike. This is the last time I'm going to bail you out."

"Okay. I'm sorry."

"I'll come as soon as I can."

"Thanks. Thank you, Bro. I owe you."

Daniel hung up before saying, "Add it to the list."

Standing among strewn garbage, the scent of rotten food wafting up around him, Daniel remembered that he had less than a quarter tank of gas in the van and only one dollar to his name. It wouldn't be enough to get to Sandpoint and back.

The hundred dollar bills in the wallet were crisp and new. Obviously the wallet had been thrown away by mistake. If he wasn't already up and searching, poor old Richard Beagle would soon be organizing a house-wide expedition for his missing wallet.

Daniel knew the right thing to do was to take the wallet up to the house and give it back, but he could use three hundred dollars right now. Surely he needed the money more than Richard Beagle, likely a retired man who spent his money collecting cast iron models of old Chevrolets.

The notion of stealing had entered Daniel's mind only one other time in his life, and that had been when his father was spending all their money on beer and cigarettes and Mom couldn't afford any groceries. He'd found twenty bucks in Dad's dirty jeans and was about to take it when Dad stormed into the room and proceeded to beat him until his backside had enough welts to make it too painful to sit down for a day.

Now he was actually considering taking those three one hundred dollar bills and

sliding them into his pocket. The thought made him sick with guilt.

It wasn't like he'd never drive by this house again—he could return the wallet with three hundred dollars next week after he got his paycheck. He would refill the billfold, set it on the front porch, and walk away. No real harm done. It was like a short-term loan.

But then it wasn't, because Richard Beagle had no idea that Daniel was borrowing his money. It was stealing, and no amount of reasoning could get around that fact.

Torn between doing what he knew was right and the desperation to provide for his family and also to obtain the required gas to go and rescue his prodigal brother, Daniel set the wallet off to the side while he finished cleaning up the rest of the trash.

Once all of the litter was packed back into the bin, Daniel eyed the wallet sitting there on the pavement. He reached down and picked it up. How bad would it be, really, if he paid the money back in a week? Richard Beagle could go without three hundred bucks for a few days.

He wavered for a moment, hardly believing what he was about to do. Then he shoved the wallet into his pocket, jumped into the cab, emptied the trashcan into the truck, and continued down the road.