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ONE  
Caleb

I've been waiting a year for this moment. It's not every day you get a chance to get out of jail. Sure, in the game of Monopoly you just have to roll the dice three times and wait for a double, or pay the fine and be free. But there are no games here at the Illinois Department of Corrections–Juvenile complex; or the DOC as we inmates call it.

Oh, it's not as rough as it sounds. The all male juvenile division is tough, but it's not like the adult DOC. You might ask why I've been locked up for the past year. I was convicted of hitting a girl with my car while driving drunk. It was a hit-and-run accident, too, which actually made the judge in my case royally pissed off. He tacked on an extra three months for that.

“You ready, Caleb?” Jerry, the cell guard, asks.

“Yes, sir.” I’ve been waiting three hundred and ten days for this. Hell, yeah, I’m ready.

I take a deep breath and follow Jerry to the room where the review committee will evaluate me. I’ve been prepped by the other guys in my cell block. *Sit up straight, look full of remorse, act polite*, and all that stuff. But, to tell you the truth, how much can you trust guys who haven’t gotten out themselves?

As Jerry opens the door to the evaluation room, my muscles start to twitch and I’m getting all sweaty beneath my state-issued coveralls, state-issued socks, and yep, even my state-issued briefs. Maybe I’m not so ready for this after all.

“Please sit down, Caleb,” orders a woman wearing glasses and a stern look on her face.

I swear the scene is out of a bad movie. Seven people sitting behind six-foot-long tables in front of one lone metal chair.

I sit on the cold, hard metal.

“As you know, we’re here to evaluate your ability to leave here and begin your life as a free citizen.”

“Yes, ma’am,” I say. “I’m ready to leave.”

A big guy, who I can tell is going to play “bad cop,” puts his hand up. “Whoa, slow down. We have a few questions to ask before we make our decision.”

Oh, man. “Sorry.”

Big Guy checks my file, flipping page after page. “Tell me about the night of the accident.”

The one night in my life I want to erase from history. Taking a deep breath, I say, “I was drinking at a party. I drove home, but lost control of the car. When I realized I hit someone, I freaked and drove back to the party.”

“You knew the girl you hit?”

Memories assault me. “Yes, sir. Maggie Armstrong . . . my neighbor.” I don’t add she was my twin sister’s best friend.

“And you didn’t get out of the car to see if your neighbor was hurt?”

I shift in my chair. “I guess I wasn’t thinking straight.”

“You *guess*?” another committee member asks.

“If I could turn back time, I swear I would. I’d change everything.”

They question me for another half hour and I spurt out answers. Why I was drinking while underage, why I’d get into a car drunk, why I left the scene of the accident. I don’t know if I’m saying the wrong thing or right thing, which puts me on edge. I’m just being me . . . seventeen-year-old Caleb Becker. If they believe me, I stand a chance of getting released early. If they don’t . . . well, I’ll be eating crappy food for another six months and continue rooming with convicts.

Big Guy looks right at me. “How do we know you won’t go on another drinking binge?”

I sit up straight in my chair and direct my attention to each and every one of the committee members. “No offense, but I never want to come back here again. I made

a huge mistake, one that's haunted me day and night since I've been here. Just . . . let me go home." For the first time in my life, I'm tempted to grovel.

Instead, I sit back and wait for another question.

"Caleb, please wait outside while we make our decision," the woman with the glasses says.

And it's over. Just like that.

I wait out in the hall. I'm usually not a guy who breaks under pressure, and the past year in jail has definitely given me an invisible piece of armor I wear around me. But waiting for a group of strangers to decide your fate is majorly nerve-racking. I wipe beads of perspiration off my forehead.

"Don't worry," guard Jerry says. "If you didn't win them over, you might get another chance in a few months."

"Great," I mumble back, not consoled in the least.

Jerry chuckles, the shiny silver handcuffs hanging off his belt clinking with each movement. The dude likes his job too much.

We wait a half hour for someone to come out of the room and give me a sign of what's next. Freedom or more jail time?

I'm tired of being locked in my cell at night.

I'm tired of sleeping on a bunk bed with springs pushing into my back.

And I'm tired of being watched twenty-four hours a day by guards, personnel, cameras, and other inmates.

The lady with the glasses opens the door. "Caleb, we're ready for you."

She isn't smiling. Is that a bad sign? I'm bracing myself

for bad news. I stand up and Jerry pats me on the back. A pity pat? Does he know something I don't? The suspense is freaking me out.

I sit back on the metal chair. All eyes are on me. Big Guy folds his hands on the table and says, "We all agree that your actions last year concerning the accident were reprehensible."

I know that. I *really* know that.

"But we believe that was an isolated incident never to be repeated. You've demonstrated positive leadership qualities with other inmates and worked hard on your jobs here. The review committee has decided to release you and have you finish out your sentence with one hundred and fifty hours of community service."

Does that mean what I think it means? "Release? As in I can leave here?" I ask the Big Guy.

"You'll be meeting with your transition coach tomorrow morning. He'll arrange your community service duties and report your progress to us."

Another member of the committee points a manicured finger at me. "If you screw up, your transition counselor can petition the judge to bring you back here to serve out the rest of your sentence. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"We don't give breaks to repeaters. Go back home, be a model citizen, finish your community service requirements, and have a good, clean life."

I *get it*. "I will," I say.

When I get back to my cell, the only one here is the new kid. He's twelve and still cries all the time. Maybe he should've thought twice before he buried a knife into the back of the girl who refused to go to the school dance with him.

"You ever gonna stop crying?" I ask the kid.

He's got his face in his pillow; I don't think he hears me. But then I hear a muffled, "I hate this place. I want to go home."

I change into my work boots because I get the pleasure of having to clean the dumpsters today. "Yeah, me too," I say. "But you're stuck here so you might as well suck it up and get with the program."

The kid sits up, snuffles, and wipes his nose with the back of his hand. "How long have you been here?"

"Almost a year."

That sets the kid plunging back into his pillow for more wailing. "I don't want to be locked up for a year," he cries.

Julio, another cell mate, walks into the room. "Seriously, Caleb, if that kid doesn't shut up, I'm gonna kill him. I haven't slept for three nights because of that cry-baby."

The wails stop, but then the snuffles start. Which are actually worse than the wailing.

"Julio, give the kid a break," I say.

"You're too soft, Caleb. Gotta toughen these kids up."

"So they can be like you? No offense, man, but you'd scare a serial killer," I say.

One look at Julio and you know he's a tough guy. Tattoos all over his neck, back, and arms. Shaved head. When my mom comes for visits, she acts like his tattoos are contagious.

"So?" Julio says. "They gonna let you outta here?"

I sit on my bed. "Yeah. Tomorrow."

"Lucky sonofabitch. You goin' back to that small town with a funny name? Wha's it called again?"

"Paradise."

"So I'll be stuck here alone with crybaby while you're in Paradise? Ain't that a bitch." He gives the kid a wide-eyed stare. If I didn't know Julio better, I'd be afraid, too.

This sets the kid off again.

Julio chuckles, then says "Well, I'll give you the number to my cousin Rio in Chicago. If you need to hightail it out of Paradise, Rio will hook you up."

"Thanks, man," I say.

Julio shakes his head at the crying kid, says "Later, *amigo*," and leaves the open cell.

I tap the kid on his shoulder. He jerks away, scared.

"I'm not gonna hurt you," I tell him.

He turns to me. "That's what they all say. I heard about what goes on in jails." He scoots his butt towards the wall.

"Don't flatter yourself, kid. You're not my type. I like chicks."

"What about the guy with the tattoos?"

I fight the urge to laugh. "He's hetero, too. Dude, you're in a juvenile facility."

“He said he’ll *kill* me.”

“He says that because he likes you,” I assure him. Julio has a sick sense of humor. “Now get off the bed, stop the crying, and go to group.”

*Group* is group therapy. Where all the inmates sit around and discuss personal shit about their lives.

Tomorrow I’m getting the hell out of this place. No more group. No more cellmates. No more crappy food. No more cleaning dumpsters.

Tomorrow I’m going home.