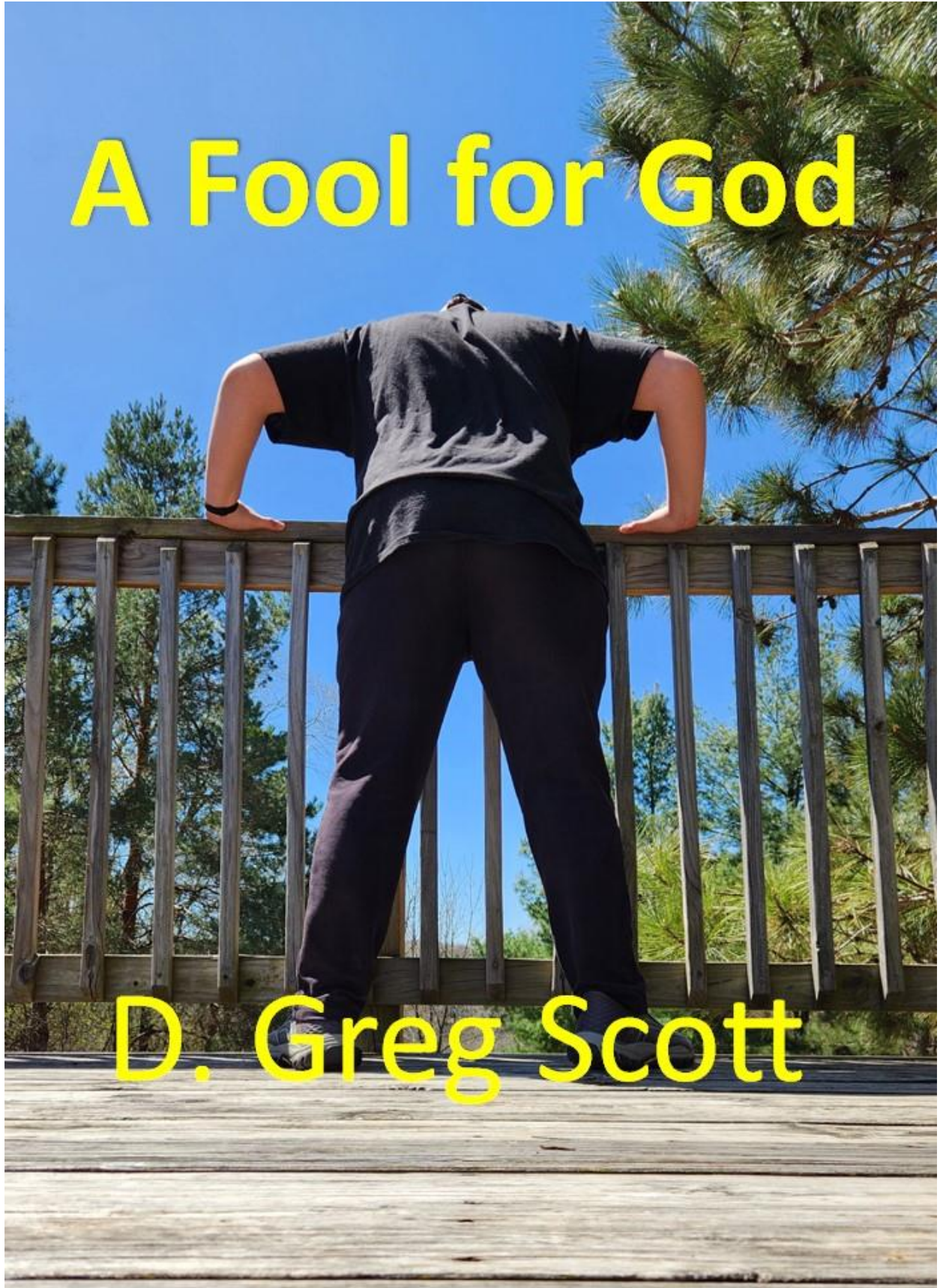


# A Fool for God

D. Greg Scott



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For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

- 1 Corinthians, chapter 1, verse 18.
- NIV Bible Translation. from <https://www.biblegateway.com>

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## 1. Foul Ball

Friday, June 3, 1988.

Bottom of the ninth, one out, down by one run, runner on second.

“Now batting, number seven, first basemen, Arik ‘Paul Bunyan’ Williamson” blared over the Granite City Tech High School PA system.

From the bleachers, “Big Swede, do the deed! Big Swede, do the deed! Big Swede, do the deed!” filled six-foot, four-inch power hitter, Arik Williamson’s ears. Those familiar butterflies worked their magic in his gut while he took one last practice swing in the on-deck circle and stepped toward the plate.

Coach had told him a few pro scouts were coming today. They would go home happy they had traveled from wherever they came from, all the way to St. Cloud, Minnesota, to watch a big Swede swing a bat. Almost like “Casey at the Bat,” except this isn’t Mudville and I’m not striking out.

Arik took a deep breath. Use the adrenaline. Don’t let it use you. Coach had drilled that into him the past four years. He snuck a glance at the pitcher, who glared as Arik ambled to the plate. I’m bringing us home. You’re going down. That pitcher’s probably thinking the same thing.

He dug in at the plate and glared back at the pitcher. Let’s see what’cha got.

The pitcher went into the stretch. He glanced at second and then delivered. Curveball in the dirt. Ball one.

Arik stepped out and went through his routine. He glanced at Coach, on first. Coach pointed to his chest and touched his belt. Expect an inside fastball, belt high. Swing away. How does he know that?

He stepped back in. The catcher signaled. The pitcher nodded. The catcher set up inside. Another stretch. An inside rocket, just like Coach said. Arik swung and fouled it back. He grimaced. One millimeter away from a walk-off.

The catcher chuckled. “That was your shot, big guy. Last one you’ll get.”

Arik stepped out again and looked at Coach. Coach pointed one finger at Arik. My call. The pitch could be anywhere. Wait a second. The pitcher throws that curve a little differently. I’d love to see one more of those. Count 1-1. Take the next one. Maybe. Unless I see something.

He stepped into the box. The pitcher went into his stretch. Didn’t even bother with the runner this time. The pitcher nodded and delivered.

Time stretched into super-slo-mo. Milliseconds stretched into seconds. The pitcher’s arm angle. Straight up and down. Just like the last fastball. That first curve—the arm had more of an angle. He thinks he can blow one by me. He’ll pay this time.

The pitch flew. Right down the middle.

Time snapped back to normal. Arik uncoiled. The crack of the bat echoed across the bleachers. The ball rocketed into straightaway left field. The outfielders trotted back. But they knew. People in the bleachers stood. They knew too. The ball hooked. And hooked some more.

Arik smiled and started his trot. The bleachers roared as the ball sailed around the foul pole, still twenty feet in the air. It landed somewhere in the next county, in foul territory. Hopefully it didn’t smash anyone’s car window. Kids jumped from the third base bleachers and ran into the parking lot to find it.

“Foul ball!” The third base umpire pointed to foul territory.

Arik slowed between first and second. “Huh?”

The crowd went silent.

The umpire pointed at him. Foul. Go finish your at-bat.

“No way. That was a homerun.”

Coach came out of the dugout. “Arik, I’ll handle this.” He walked toward the umpire.

“Russ, what’s going on?”

“That ball hooked foul in front of the foul pole.”

“No, it didn’t.”

“Yeah, it did. It’s a foul.”

“You gotta be kidding. Everybody here just watched that ball wrap around the foul pole outta the park.”

“Nope. It went in front of the foul pole. Now, go back to your dugout.”

The other umpires joined the discussion.

“Get another opinion. That ball was a homerun. This game’s over. We won.” Coach turned to the other umpires.

After a few seconds, the third base umpire said, “Coach, I’m gonna ask you one last time. Go back to your dugout.”

Coach lost it. “That was a homerun. What’s wrong with you?”

The umpire reared back as if he were ready to toss a ball into space, extended an index finger and threw his arm toward the outfield. “You’re outta here. Don’t escalate this anymore.”

The crowd booed.

Coach took off his cap and pointed it toward Arik. “I’m sorry.” The crowd roared. He shook his head and trudged toward the exit under the bleachers.



The umpires huddled as the boos got louder. After a minute, the home plate umpire walked to Arik, still waiting between first and second. “Maybe it was a bad call. Maybe not. But it was the call and we’re sticking with it. Go finish your at-bat.”

Arik balled his fists.

“Don’t go there. You’re better than that. I’m not gonna say it again. Go finish your at-bat or go join your coach.”

Arik looked down and trudged back to the plate. The baserunner trotted back out to second base. The crowd booed even louder.

Arik grabbed his bat and took a couple practice swings. Get back into the zone. He stepped toward the plate. “What’s the count?”

“One and two.” The ump took his position.

Arik stepped into the batter’s box.

“You got screwed.” The catcher chuckled. “Too bad, so sad.”

Arik signaled for a timeout and stepped out. “Shut up.”

The catcher chuckled.

He’s trying to get in my head. Arik took a breath and stepped back in.

The pitcher went into his stretch and delivered. Another curve. Starting high. Gonna drop into the zone. Arik swung. Sweet crack of the bat. A frozen rope to left. Not a homer but should tie the game.

The runner on second broke for third. The shortstop jumped like an NBA basketball player. The ball snow-coned in his glove and bounced out. The shortstop reached with his bare hand on the way down and snagged it. Base runner in no-mans-land. Off balance, the shortstop tossed the ball to the second baseman. Double play. Game over.

Polite clapping from the crowd. We'll get 'em next year. Both teams lined up to shake hands.

Arik smashed his bat against the nearest fencepost. The bat splintered. He ran off the field.

#####

Arik stared at his locker.

"C'mon man, shake it off."

"Not your fault."

"That ump screwed you over good."

Arik kicked at his locker and dented the door.

"Enough." The coach stood in the doorway. "It's over. Life isn't always fair. Take your shower."

The third base umpire popped in behind Coach. "Can I talk to him for a minute?"

"You got guts, Russ, I'll give you that. Make it quick."

Russ ambled in and sat next to Arik. "Arik, I'm sorry. I could have sworn that ball went in front of the pole. Now, I'm not so sure. A shame we don't have instant replay in high school ball."

Arik shook his head and fought tears. "Just get away from me, man. He stood and smashed his locker again. He stripped and headed into the shower.

#####

Showered and dressed, Arik walked out of the locker room toward his car.

The catcher from the other team caught up to him. “Hey big guy. No hard feelings – it’s only a game, right?”

Arik walked a little faster. “Yeah, whatever.”

“You’re Arik Williamson. With an A and a K, right?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m Les Moreau.” He extended a hand.

Arik chuckled. “Huh. ‘Cuz less is more?”

“Yeah, like I haven’t heard that about a million times.”

They shook hands.

“So, some of the guys and me, we were thinking about getting some beer tonight. I figured you could use some.”

“Yeah, maybe. Where?”

“At the quarry. Around Nine.”

“Thanks. I’ll think about it.”

## 2. Quarry

An eagle soared high above the observation deck, overlooking a majestic view of the quarry lake 30 feet below. Arik leaned against the deck railing and took another sip of his beer. Teenagers, mostly baseball players, stood in pockets and chatted and chuckled about today's game, the season, girls, cars, college, girls, football, basketball, and girls.

"Glad you came." Les, the catcher, extended a hand.

Arik shook it. "Who can turn down free beer?"

Les smiled. They tapped bottles. Both took a sip. "Who brought it?"

"My older brother, Russ. You might recognize him. Hope you're not still pissed." Les pointed to Russ, the third base umpire who made that foul-ball call, a few feet away talking to the sheriff.

"You gotta be kidding me." Arik set his beer on the built-in bench in front of the deck railing and turned to leave.

The sheriff and Russ ambled over. The sheriff turned to Arik. "You left a beer bottle on that bench. You plan to dispose of it properly, right?"

Arik locked eyes on Russ.

Russ looked down.

"Yes sir, I do." Arik turned away from Russ to retrieve his bottle.

"Make sure you remind everyone here. Keep me happy by keeping this place clean."

"Yeah. I'll make sure." Russ zipped in front of the deck railing and turned to face Arik.

"Hey Arik, can I talk to you for a minute?"

Arik shook his head. "What do you want to talk about? How you screwed me over? Save it."

“No. How you handle adversity.”

“What? You’re an umpire, not a coach.”

“Where do you think they get umpires?”

“Whatever. Did you know there were pro scouts at that game? That homer was my ticket. You took it away. And you cost us the game.”

“No. Fair or foul, you still hit that ball just as hard. You gotta be the strongest kid in this county. But splintering that bat against the dugout fence? Your temper tantrum is a bad look.”

“Just leave me alone.”

“Work on your attitude.”

Arik’s vision narrowed to only Russ’s face. He pushed Russ with everything he had. Russ launched off his feet. His heels smashed into the bench in front of the deck railing. The rest of his body flew against the railing and sagged outward. Russ’s eyes widened. Arik dove to grab him. Too late. The top plate gave way. Railing pieces flew everywhere. Momentum carried Russ’s body through the shattered railing. He tumbled over the edge.

Thud. Russ’s body crashed into the rocks and water below.

Heads turned. People rushed over.

The sheriff elbowed his way through the crowd. “What happened?”

Time blurred. Wails, an ambulance, sirens, lights, tears, interviews, handcuffs.

“You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can be used against you in a court of law. You have the right to an attorney. If you cannot afford an attorney, one will be provided for you. Do you understand these rights?”

Arik stared at the sheriff. “What?”

The sheriff repeated, “Do you understand your rights I just read to you?”

“I guess, I dunno. Let’s just go see if that guy’s okay.”

“He’s dead. You killed him.”

“No, he’s not. Let’s go help him.”

The sheriff got in Arik’s face. “The paramedics already tried. He’s dead. You killed him. I’m arresting you for second degree murder.”

### 3. Trial

Seated behind the defense table inside the Stearns County courtroom in downtown St. Cloud, Minnesota, Arik struggled to take a calming breath in spite of the shirt and tie strangling him. That fear deep in his gut had gotten worse in the nine months since that horrible night. Counsellors had taught him breathing exercises and tons of other voodoo, but only one thing stopped the movie of that awful night from playing over and over behind his eyes. But his parents and defense attorney, Lise Perrault, had made it clear he needed to stay clean during the nine months leading to the trial.

And now, it was finally time for the defense to present its case.

Lise whispered in Arik's ear, "You're gonna like this." She rose to her feet. "The defense calls Albert Murray."

Prosecutor Leon Kaslowski stood. "Objection. I don't know anything about this witness."

Lise smiled. "Yes, you do. And so will everyone else in a few minutes."

The judge frowned. "What's going on here?"

"Stearns County knows Mr. Murray well, even if they don't want to acknowledge him. I met Mr. Murray last night, and his testimony directly relates to this case."

"I'll allow it. Don't abuse my good will."

Murray took his oath and sat in the witness stand.

"Mr. Murray, please tell the court who you are."

"I'm Al Murray, and I'm a structural engineer and a licensed building inspector. I work for Stearns County."

"In July, 1987, you inspected the observation deck where this tragedy occurred last summer, right?"

“Yes.”

“What did you find?”

“The railing posts were rotted.”

“What does that mean?”

“Think of railing posts like fence posts. Fence posts extend from the ground and hold up fences. Deck railing posts extend from the bottom of decks and hold up the railing. When fence posts rot, fences that depend on them collapse. When railing posts rot, railings collapse.”

“But that was twenty-one months ago. Didn’t anyone fix it?”

“No. Public decks all over this area are approaching thirty years old, and they all need maintenance. But nobody wants to pay for it.”

“How do you know nobody fixed this deck?”

“Because my phone rang the night of the incident, and I was told to look into it.”

“Who called you?”

“I don’t know. I was asleep when the phone rang. But it worried me enough that I got dressed and drove out there to look for myself. Police were still around. I inspected the damage and there was only one conclusion. That railing broke apart because it was rotted, not because anyone shattered it.”

“Did you collect samples?”

“Yes. And lots of pictures. And video. I asked Officer Davis to hold a camcorder while we looked at stress points, especially around the bolts.”

“The bolts?”

“They hold the railing posts against an outer rim joist. If somebody had shattered the railing, the posts would have broken, with the bottom of the post still attached with the bolts. But



that's not what I saw. The bolts were clean, except for some residue. Something pushed the wood right through the bolts, which means the wood had to have been extremely soft. From rot."

"The prosecution's theory is that my client pushed Russ Moreau with such force that he shattered the deck railing and flew over the edge. What are you suggesting?"

"That railing was an accident waiting to happen. It was so rotted that somebody even leaning against it could have knocked it down."

Lise stepped to the defense table and picked up a folder. "Do you recognize these pictures?" She handed the folder to Al.

Al looked them over. "Yes. I took these pictures that night."

"I want to call your attention to the pictured labeled number twelve. Would you describe it please, and tell the jury why it's significant?"

Al picked out the picture. "It shows the clean bolts I told you about on the rim joist overlooking the rocks."

"Thank you."

Al placed the pictures back in the folder and handed it to Lise. She handed it to the prosecutor. "I would like to enter these pictures as defense exhibit A."

The prosecutor stood. "Wait a minute. This is the first time I've seen any of this. We've had nine months to get ready for this trial. Why are we first hearing about this now? You can't introduce evidence like this at the last minute. We don't know if these are pictures of that deck or when they were taken."

Lise took back her folder and placed it on the judge's bench. "Your Honor, I can clear up my colleague's concerns with a few more questions to the witness, if you'll indulge me."

The judge nodded. "I'm curious myself. Mr. Murray, what light can you shed on the timing of all this?"

"Simple. Nobody called me. I walked around the scene all night, collecting samples and taking pictures. Officer Davis held a camcorder while I documented everything with video. A couple of other officers held flashlights. I collected and logged all of it, but nobody called me."

The judge looked perplexed. "So, why are we hearing from you today?"

"Because I saw news stories about this trial last week and realized nobody had contacted me. So, I contacted. Ms. Perrault over the weekend."

"She said she met you last night."

"That's right. I tried calling several times Monday and Tuesday but couldn't get through. So, I drove to her office yesterday morning and waited. We finally shook hands around 4:30 p.m."

The judge leaned back in his chair. "I don't suppose Officer Davis is here?"

Officer Davis, in the audience, rose. "Yes sir. Right here."

"And the officers who helped with the flashlights?"

Two officers stood. "Yes sir."

The judge nodded. "Here's what we're going to do. Mr. Murray, please step down. Officer Davis, please come up so the clerk can swear you in. I have a few questions for you and the officers who held the flashlight. Then we'll break for the day while I determine if this evidence is credible. And I want to talk to both attorneys in private. Both of you, come up here."

Lise and the prosecutor approached.

The judge leaned forward. "Ms. Perrault, you claim you didn't know about any of this until last night. I'll take you at your word if I hear what I expect to hear from these police

officers. Mr. Kaslowski, I'll also take you at your word that this is the first you've heard of any of this. But I'll expect a report from you first thing in the morning about why nobody contacted Mr. Murray before this trial. And to you both—if I find either of you violated any ethics rules in this matter, I'll throw the book at you. Is there anything either of you want to tell me now, before I find out some other way?"

Both Lise and the prosecutor said, "No."

"Very well. Step back"

The judge questioned the officers and then adjourned for the day.

#####

The court reconvened at 10:00 a.m. the next day. The judge entered and took his seat.

"Both attorneys, approach."

Lise tapped Arik's shoulder. "Sit tight. I think this will be over in a few minutes." She strode to the bench.

The prosecutor moved slower.

The judge stared down at the prosecutor from above his bench. "Mr. Kaslowski, I believe you have a report for me."

The prosecutor tried one of those same calming breaths, which didn't seem to calm him. He craned his neck to look up at the judge. "Your Honor, I asked everyone I could find. I made phone calls. I tried more people this morning. Nobody offered any explanation."

The judge's eyes burned into the prosecutor. "Do you have any reason to doubt what we heard yesterday about the structural problems with that observation deck?"

The prosecutor shook his head. "No, Your Honor."

“Very well. Step back.” The judge waved his hands to shush them away.

The attorneys moved back to their tables.

Lise took Arik’s hand.

The judge looked over the court. “Mr. Williamson, please rise with your attorney. You too, Mr. Kaslowski.”

Everyone stood. Lise whispered in Arik’s ear. “Here it comes.”

The judge pursed his lips. “We have a person on trial here for second degree murder. Mr. Williamson, if found guilty, you could go to prison for the rest of your life because of one impulsive act. But given what we learned yesterday, with corroborating testimony from police officers, and acknowledging that the prosecutor accepts those facts, this case should never have gone to trial. I’m dismissing this case. Mr. Williamson, you are free to go. I urge you to work on your temper. A human being died because of your action, and if this were a reckless homicide case, this trial would continue. But they charged you with second degree murder, which the facts don’t support. Mr. Kaslowski, your office wasted the court’s time, these jurors’ times, and Stearns County money. I strongly suggest your office investigate what went wrong here, so this never happens again. And Ms. Perrault and Mr. Kaslowski, if I find either of you violated any ethics rules over this case, I will find you, and you will feel sanctions. Do I make myself clear?”

“Yes sir.” Lise suppressed a smile. The prosecutor stared at his shoes.

The judge continued. “Thank you to the jurors who heard this case, and on behalf of Stearns County, I apologize for wasting your time. We’re done here.” He tapped his gavel and then exited.

Lise drew Arik into a hug. “We did it. We won!”

Arik pulled away. “Yeah. Um, thanks.” He turned away from Lise and almost bowled an old man over.

The old man steadied himself against the defense table and chuckled. “Congratulations, Arik. With an A and a K.”

“Thanks. Do I know you?”

“Probably not. But I know you. And I have a message for you. Accept the gift God gave you here in this trial. He has something in mind for you. Be on the lookout for it.”

Arik’s parents grabbed Arik and Lise into a group hug. “You won. Thank you so much, Ms. Perrault.”

Lise smiled. “You’re welcome.”

Arik turned to the old man to ask his name, and then back to his father. “Did you see where that guy went?”

“Which guy?” Dad craned his neck.

“The guy who was standing right here.”

Lise furrowed her brow. “I didn’t see anybody.”

Dad put his arms around Arik and Lise. “Let’s go celebrate. Lise, you’re welcome to join us. How did you find that guy yesterday?”

Lise chuckled. “I didn’t. He found me.”

Arik ducked under his father’s arm. “I’d just like to be alone for a while if that’s okay with you.”

Arik’s father nodded. “Yeah, that’s fine.” His eyes hardened. “Stay clean. You have a life to rebuild.”

“I will.” But that movie kept playing. This time with a narrator. The verdict doesn’t matter. You killed him. You should fry.

#####

Hours later, Arik sat alone at that same observation deck, now with new railing. He pushed on it. Solid. He’d have to jump over the top to get it done. Under the moonlight, he stared over the quarry lake where he’d killed Russ Moreau nine months ago. The movie behind his eyes played again. Railing flying everywhere. The fear in Russ’s eyes. That thud. But this time, another narrator showed up. Don’t do it. God wants you for something.

He gulped another swig of whatever-it-was the liquor store sold him. It tastes like me. A worthless bottle of crap.

Both narrators kept at it. Don’t do it. That old guy said God has something in mind for you. Take a dive, wuss. Get it over with. They should have fried you.

“SHUT UP!” The words echoed across the rocks. A couple of dogs barked in the distance.

Arik staggered to his car and climbed behind the wheel. He downed the last swig and bawled.

## 4. Ten Years later

Friday, July 3, 1998.

Arik rose from his bar stool. He stumbled, but caught himself on the bar. He raised his glass.

“Time to celebrate. Here’s a round for everyone. On me.”

A few people clapped him on the back. Others cheered or raised their glasses.

The bartender raised his hands. “Hold on a second, folks. We need to work out a few details first.” He leaned on his elbows in front of Arik. “You don’t look so good. What’s going on?”

Arik shook his head. “I’m fine. I didn’t like those morons anyway.”

“Which morons?”

“The ones at GC.”

“Huh?”

Arik sighed. “Granite City HVAC. They wouldn’t know a vent from a drywall hole.” He laughed at his joke.

The bartender nodded. “Ah. So, you don’t work for them anymore?”

Arik chuckled. “Nope. Not anymore.”

“What happened?”

“Let’s just say they blame me for all their problems.”

The bartender spread his hands. “Ohhh. Now, I get it. How many have you had?”

“Not enough.” Arik stumbled to his feet again. “How about a round for the house?”

The bartender grinned and shook his head. “Nah, not a good idea. Company policy. We need to get you a ride home.”

“I’m not ready to go home.”

“Got anyone waiting for you?”

“Just Lana.”

“Who’s Lana?”

“My girlfriend. Probably worrying about me.”

“Ah. Well, why don’t I call her and let her know you’re okay?”

Arik offered a drunken smile. “Good idea. Maybe she can come down and celebrate with me.”

“What’s her number?”

Arik gave the bartender Lana’s phone number. The bartender called her from his office phone and returned to Arik at the bar.

“Good news. She’ll be here in a few minutes.”

Arik teared up. “Ah, thanks man. I love her so much.”

“I know. Sit tight. She’s on her way.”

#####

Thirty minutes later, Arik grabbed the bartender’s attention. “Know where she is?”

“No. How far away does she live?”

“Maybe a half hour.”

“Give her a few more minutes.”

#####

Two hours later, Arik woke up and lifted his head. His neck ached. His arm rested in a puddle of sticky drool. He grabbed a napkin and wiped his chin.



The bartender ambled over. "Give me your keys and I'll call you a cab."

Arik nodded. "Yeah. Sorry. Guess I fell asleep. Long day. What happened to Lana?"

"Not sure." The bartender wiped up the drool.

A few minutes later, the bartender signaled somebody entering the bar and then turned to Arik. "Hey buddy, your cab is here."

The cab driver and bartender helped Arik into the taxi. "Get some sleep. In the morning, your car will be right here where you left it. Here are your keys."

The cab took off. Arik reclined in the seat and closed his eyes. What happened to Lana? He tried to calm himself.

"Whoa." The cab driver hit his brakes.

Arik woke and braced himself against the front seat. "What's going on?"

"Traffic jam. Weird, this time of night." The driver craned his head out the window. "Looks like an accident."

"Looks like we're pretty close to home."

"Yeah, just a couple blocks, I think."

"Why don't I pay you now. I'll walk the rest of the way. I could use some fresh air."

"You gonna be okay?"

"I'll be fine." Arik paid the driver and stepped out. He headed down Tenth Avenue South toward his apartment. Just past the Menards parking lot, yellow caution tape blocked his way. A few people stood around, gesturing.

Arik approached somebody. "What happened?"

“A truck T-boned that little Toyota over there. The paramedics left a while ago. I don’t think the driver made it.” He pointed to a what was left of a ten-year-old, beige Toyota Corolla in the field across from the Menards parking lot.

Arik’s gut clinched. He stepped under the caution tape toward the wreckage. No. Please. No. He stepped around the car. His hands shook. A twisted tangle of metal and plastic was all that was left of the driver’s side. Blood pooled underneath. “Oh, God. No.”

A police officer approached. “Sir, we’re still investigating the scene. I need you to step away.”

“I have to look in the trunk.”

“This your car?”

“No. I think it’s my girlfriend’s. We live together.”

The police officer straightened and took a breath. “Oh. Okay. What’s in the trunk?”

“She kept a Teddy Bear in there.”

“Okay. Let me see if I can find the key.”

“I have a key. But I hope it doesn’t work.”

The police officer nodded. “I understand.”

Arik took out his key and tried it. The trunk opened. “Oh, God. No. No.” He collapsed and sobbed. Why? God, why?

After a few minutes, the officer squatted next to Arik and put his arm around Arik’s shoulder.

Arik nodded and wiped his nose. “How did it happen?”

“From what we can tell, a truck proceeding east on Parkway Drive ran a stop sign and struck the driver’s side of this car proceeding north on Tenth Avenue South. The impact blocked

traffic in both directions. Paramedics found a female driver, pregnant but deceased. They were unable to save the unborn baby. We towed the truck away. The driver's in custody. Moving the car will take longer."

Arik looked down and fought tears.

"I am so sorry. Let me get you some help."

Arik nodded.

"Here." The police officer handed Arik a business card. "If you need anything, call."

"Thanks." Arik glanced at the card. Lester Moreau. His heart skipped a beat. "I know you. Ten years ago. At the game and the quarry. You were the catcher. Oh, God, I killed your brother."

Les's eyes got big. "Arik?"

"Yeah." Arik took a step back.

Les stumbled away. "I'll get somebody to help you."

"That's okay." Arik hustled away. Ten years of hazy memories flooded his mind. The guilt after that night. The training he had barely passed. HVAC jobs that always began with so much promise, ruined by showing up for work wasted or hung over. Meeting Lana two years ago, the only good thing in his life. They were both going to get sober this summer and get their lives together. Together. But now, Lana was gone, because she came to pick me up because I was wasted in another bar because I got fired from another job. I didn't deserve her. She didn't deserve this.

His feet carried him along Tenth Avenue, to the right turn at Seventh Street toward the Prosper West Apartments and home. Or, what used to be home.

Yeah, it was a car accident. But I killed Lana. Just like I killed Russ ten years ago. God, why did you have to kill her? You should have taken me. I don't deserve to live.

Instead of turning into his apartment, his feet carried him farther west down Seventh Street to the Quarry Park entrance and the field where they had parked their cars after that game ten years ago. Jimmy Brooks with his tricked-out Camaro, Greg Jennings with that hunk of junk Pontiac, Bennie Alveraz with his motorcycle, and dozens more.

In the real world, now they were adult stockbrokers and fathers and teachers and laborers and managers, ten years and a million miles from that quarry. Except for Arik, the drunk loser. But tonight, their echoes from high school had parked the memories of their cars and made their way back to the observation deck. They were all waiting. One last party.

What'cha gonna do, Arik?

He followed the same trails to the same destination. Just like ten years ago. Except, no rotted railing this time. The guys taunted him. You don't have the guts. It probably won't work anyway.

He stepped up onto the deck and gazed over the railing to the rocks and quarry lake, thirty feet below. Just climb up and jump. Head first. Over in a couple seconds. But you don't have the guts. You're a loser. You can't even get a suicide right.

"It's a beautiful view, isn't it?" A man's voice from behind shattered the quiet.

Arik jumped and turned. "You scared me."

An old man smiled. "Sorry. I keep telling people, do not be afraid, but they're usually afraid anyway. At least, at first."

"Do I know you?"

"We've met before."

“When?”

“About ten years ago. Remember?”

Arik rubbed the back of his head and stared at the guy. He plopped onto the bench. “You were at my trial.”

The old man nodded.

“You said God gave me a gift.”

“Good. You remember. I also told you God has something in mind for you. Remember that?”

“You disappeared. I forgot about you. Until just now.”

“Well, I didn’t forget about you. Neither did God. He is sorry for your loss, but He still has something in mind for you.” The old man stepped to the railing and looked down. “It seems, this might be a good time to explore it.” He sat on the bench next to Arik and pulled an apple from his bag. “Want one? You look hungry.”

“No, thanks. Who are you?”

“I like to wander through the park sometimes. Especially at night when it’s quiet.” He bit into his apple.

Arik stared into space for several seconds. “I killed her.”

The old man put his arm around Arik. “No. You didn’t. She’ll live forever in Heaven.”

Arik sobbed. After a few minutes, he wiped his eyes. “How do you know?”

“I have a sense about these things.” The old man stood and turned to face Arik. He went down to one knee and bored his eyes into Arik’s brain. “You can live forever too, you know.”

Arik met the old man’s gaze. “How?”

“Say yes to Jesus.”

“That’s it? What does that even mean?”

“Some of the answers you want are in the Alcoholics Anonymous Twelve steps. It’s all in the Bible. For now, just accept Jesus as your Lord and Savior and fill in details later.”

“You think I’m some kind of alcoholic?”

The old man sat next to Arik again. “You tell me. How many jobs have you been fired from?”

Arik shook his head. “I don’t know.”

The old man took another bite of his apple and dropped the core on the deck floor.

“Isn’t that littering?”

“I like to leave apple cores for the animals.”

Arik nodded. “So, what does this God have in mind for me?”

The old man smiled. “For now, He wants you to live.”

“That’s it?”

“Beats suicide. By the way, if you decide to jump from the railing, you’ll probably just injure yourself. Maybe you’ll end up in a wheelchair the rest of your life.”

“What makes you think...how did you know?”

“I know a lot of things. And trust me when I tell you, God wants you to live. But you have free will and you can decide to kill yourself if you want. Nobody will stop you.”

Arik hung his head. “How can I keep going without Lana?”

“Accept Jesus as your Savior and she’ll be there, waiting for you in the next life.”

“How do I even know there is a next life?”

“That’s why we call it faith. Start reading your Bible to help it make sense. The book of John in the New Testament is a good place to start. You have a lot to offer. But you have a lot to learn.”

Arik contemplated for a couple minutes. “How do I accept Jesus?”

“Just ask God to forgive you and tell Him you want to join His kingdom. There are all kinds of suggested prayers, but it’s not like there’s a secret handshake or anything.”

“You mean, like right now?”

“Why not?”

“What happens after I say this prayer?”

“Depends.”

“On what?”

“On a lot of things. Mostly on whether you really mean it. But don’t expect anything dramatic.”

“So, no trumpets in the sky or anything like that?”

“Nope. Just a couple guys sitting on an observation deck in Quarry Park in the middle of the night.” The old man turned his head to Arik. “You ready?”

“Sure, why not?”

“Okay. So just repeat this after me. Jesus, I ask you to forgive me for all my sins, and I accept you as my Lord and Savior. Amen.”

“Do I need to kneel or anything?”

“If you want to.”

“No, that’s okay. Jesus, I ask you to forgive me for all my sins, and I accept you as my Lord and Savior. Amen.”

The old man smiled. “Welcome to the club.”

“So, now what?”

“Get some sleep. Grieve for Lana. Join an AA group. Ask God to help keep you clean and dry. Look for another job. Recover. And remember, you’re not alone. God’s in your corner.”

Arik nodded. He stood, turned away, stretched, and then turned back. A new apple sat on the bench instead of the old man. An apple core sat on the deck floor. An owl hooted. Arik picked up the apple and took a bite. It really was sweet. He headed home.

Lana, I’m so sorry. I don’t know if I can do this.

A thought bubbled its way into his consciousness. You can. I’ll help.



## 5. Panic

Three months sober. Arik's AA sponsor, Nick, said it was time to celebrate. Arik wasn't so sure. Three months sober really means three months of living with those memories with nothing to numb the pain. But that's the whole idea. Numbing the pain doesn't make it go away. It just numbs it. And then it comes back even worse. Celebrating pain—doesn't make any sense when I think about it.

The waitress brought pie slices.

Nick, sitting across from Arik in a booth, tried a bite. "Oh man, this is good. I'm gonna pig out. Try yours."

Arik stared at his pie slice.

Nick put his fork down. "Three months, man. Celebrate the small victories. Because they add up to big victories. Try one bite."

Arik dabbed a tear. He tried a bite. Wow. Everything's vivid when you're clean. Even taste. "Yeah, this is great." He nodded. "Just great." He fought tears.

"And GC HVAC brought you back?"

Arik dabbed his eyes again. "You gotta swallow first. But, yeah. Last week I went in and apologized and told Bill I'm in AA now and clean. They need techs, and so Bill took me back on probation."

Nick beamed. With pie on his mouth and chin. He swallowed and wiped his face. "Good. Now take another bite. You earned it."

Arik cut another bite and put it to his lips.

Les and a couple of other police officers walked in and sat in a nearby booth, with Les's back to Arik.

Arik's mouth went dry. His fingers tingled. He gulped for air. "I can't breathe." He gulped again. His heart pounded. His vision narrowed. "I can't breathe." He dropped his fork.

Nick came around to Arik's side of the table. "Cops are right over there. Let me get you some help."

"No. Les. Cop. No!"

"What?"

"I killed..." Arik gulped a breath. "Brother. No."

"I don't get it."

Arik ran outside.

Nick followed and pushed the door open.

A waitress shouted, "hey!"

"I'll be right back. I promise" Nick dashed out the door.

Arik gasped for breath. He staggered around a corner and sat with his head between his legs.

"What just happened?"

Arik took a few more breaths. Measured. Calming.

"That cop. I killed his brother ten years ago. I saw him at the accident where Lana died."

"Does he know you did it?"

"Yeah. He was there." Arik tried a few more calming breaths. "I can't go back in there." He handed some money to Nick. "I'll be okay in a minute. Just go pay and let's get outta here."

"You sure?"

"Yeah. I get panicky every time I think about him. Seeing him here made it ten times worse."

“This the first time you’ve seen him since then?”

“Yeah.”

Nick nodded. “Okay.”

Nick went back inside to pay for their meal. Outside, Arik fought panic to a stalemate.

## 6. Hester Park

Sunday, July 4 1999.

One year sober. The doorbell rang. And rang again. And again.

Arik rolled over in bed. What time is it? He cleared the crud from his eyes. 11:02. Not even noon yet. He put on shorts and a tee-shirt and padded to the door.

It was Nick. "I'm worried about you, man." He stepped inside and plopped on a couch.

Arik closed the door. "I'm fine. Just wanted to sleep in."

"Nope. There's more going on."

"What are you, my fairy godmother?"

Nick laughed. "Sure, why not?"

Arik rolled his eyes. "Want some water or some coffee or some pop or something?"

"I'll have some water."

"You know where I keep everything."

It was Nick's turn to roll his eyes. He sauntered into the kitchen and grabbed a glass from the cabinet. "You know what I'm talking about. You're turning into a hermit."

"As long as you're standing there, get me a cup too."

Nick poured some water and handed the glass to Arik. "Cut the crap. What's going on?"

Arik took a deep breath and rubbed his eyes. "Les, that cop. I can't take a chance he'll see me."

"The guy whose brother died?"

"The guy whose brother I killed."

"Hmm. So, you're hiding from him?"

"No. I just..."

“Just what?”

“Well, what if he sees me?”

“What if he does?”

“He’s gotta be mad. He’s gonna want to kill me.”

“So, you think hiding in bed will make everything all better?”

“Stop.”

“Aw, wittle boy. Do you want mommy to wipe your butt?”

Arik chuckled.

“Get dressed. We’re going to Hester Park to look for girls. And watch the fireworks tonight.”

“No. We’re not looking for girls.”

“Been a year.”

“I’m not ready. Besides, what if he’s there?”

“So, what if he is?”

“He’ll see me.”

Nick shook his head. “Man, you gotta face this. Seriously. From what you told me, and with the judge throwing it out, it was an accident. If this cop, Les, wanted to kill you, he would’ve done it by now.”

Arik sighed. “Yeah. Maybe you’re right.” He trudged into his bedroom and dressed.

“The only thing we have to fear is...fear itself — nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance.”

“Who said that?”

“FDR.”

“And you memorized it?” Arik slipped on his shoes.

“Yeah. I repeat it every time I get afraid and want a drink.”

Arik tied his shoes. “Ah. Well, maybe I’ll memorize it too.”

#####

The pre-dusk sunlight reflected off the Mississippi River at Hester Park a few blocks north of downtown St. Cloud, Minnesota. Teenage boys threw rocks in the water. Other people played frisbee and walked dogs and spread blankets to watch the upcoming fireworks show, coming soon. Police officers patrolled back and forth.

Nick turned on a dime and jumped in front of two women in swimsuits walking toward the river. “Excuse me, ladies, are you married?”

The brunette chuckled. The blonde gaped. “Depends. What’s your and your friend’s status?”

Nick smiled. “My friend and me? No. Oh – no, I mean, no, no. We both like girls and no, we’re not married.”

Arik laughed and shook his head. “Smooth. I’m sorry my friend bothered you. I’m Arik.” He extended a hand. The brunette took it.

A squad car parked in the parking lane on Sixth Avenue north between the playground equipment and pool. Les climbed out.

Arik froze.

The brunette’s face clouded. “What’s wrong?”

“I gotta go.” Arik bolted toward the river. He dodged a baby carriage and veered right. He ran past the playground and glanced over his shoulder. Nick was still there. Les—who knows? I gotta get away.

Arik dodged a grandma with a baby and tripped on a blanket. Crackers and pop flew everywhere. Somebody shouted. He scrambled to his feet and ran into the trees between the river and a house. He cowered behind a pine tree.

Breathless. His fingers tingled. Vision narrowed. His temples pounded. Control it. Breathe in. Breathe out. Breathe in. Breathe out. He’s looking for me. No, he’s not. Yes, he is. Breathe in, breathe out. Arik put his head between his legs and closed his eyes. I did it again. Breathe in. Breathe out. Arik fought tears.

“What happened back there?” Nick’s voice.

Arik jumped. Breathe in. Breathe out. “I’m sorry. He was there.”

“Who was there?”

“Les. The cop who got out of the squad car.”

Nick plopped next to Arik. “They were good lookin’. It coulda been great.”

“Sorry. We should go.”

“Yeah.”

## 7. New Years Eve

Friday, Dec. 31, 1999

Arik stepped inside the venue for tonight's Friday AA meeting. Well, not so much a meeting as a sober Y2K Eve party. Coming tonight was Nick's idea. Get out and mingle in a safe place. And what's safer than an AA group?

Arik leaned against a wall. People holding cups of pop, coffee, water, or juice chatted in groups. A few hovered around a table filled with celery, carrots, cucumbers, doughnuts, and rolls.

I'm not so sure I should be here. But I can't just leave. Maybe one doughnut and some water.

"Arik. With an A and a K, right?" A woman's voice. Behind him.

Arik turned. "Yeah. That's me. Nice to meet you." She's nice-looking.

"I'm June. Nice to meet you, too. You do HVAC, right?"

"Yeah. How'd you know?"

"I come to the Monday meetings and heard you when you told your story."

"Oh."

"Can I ask you a question?"

"Sure."

"Will my furnace blow up at midnight?"

Arik laughed. "You mean from all the Y2K stuff? Probably not."

"Well, would you mind taking a look at it?"

Arik's ears felt warm. "Um, well, I didn't bring any tools with me."

"I don't think you'll need any tools." June gave a look.



Arik's gut tingled. "Oh. Um, okay. Wow. Yeah."

June laughed. "Are you blushing?"

"Probably."

Les, in civilian clothes, poked his head in. He locked eyes with Arik and rushed out.

Arik wrapped his arms around himself and squeezed his eyes shut.

"What's wrong?" June's voice sounded alarmed.

Not again. Not this time. Arik bolted toward the door.

"Did I say something wrong?"

Arik turned. "No. Please—just wait here."

People around the room looked up.

Les disappeared out the door. Arik followed into the parking lot. A car chirped. Les jumped in and started it. Arik ran toward the car. It pulled away. He chased it out of the parking lot. The car disappeared down the street. Arik pulled up, out of breath.

Why did Les follow me here? Why did he run when I saw him?

Arik trudged back inside.

June looked upset. "That's the second time you've done this to me. Why?"

Arik hung his head. "I killed his brother eleven years ago. I think he wants to kill me."

He worked to control his hyperventilating. Breathe in. Breathe out. "Wait. Second time?"

"Hester Park. Six months ago. Fourth of July?"

Arik looked up. "That was you?" He looked closer. "That was you! Your hair is different. And no swimsuit. Oh, man, I am so sorry. I'm supposed to be past all this. God was supposed to forgive me, but I keep making a fool out of myself."

"You want to grab a table and talk? I'm a good listener."

“Yeah. I’d like that.”

#####

“Happy new year.” Arik and June tapped pop cans.

Arik sat his pop down. “Thanks for staying with me tonight. It’s been a year and a half. I haven’t—I haven’t been able to—” He fought tears.

“It’s okay. My husband died two years ago. I still cry about it. Especially at night when I miss him.” June’s eyes misted.

Arik chuckled through the tears. “Are we romantic or what?”

June smiled and touched Arik’s hand. “But we’re real. Maybe we could be friends?”

Arik nodded. “Yeah.”

“Wanna go for a walk? I could use some fresh air.”

Arik nodded. She took his hand and they strolled out the door.

After walking a while, June stopped and took both of Arik’s hands. She looked up into his eyes. “Ya know, maybe what we need is a change of pace. You still live in that same apartment. You still freak out every time you see this Les. I still cry myself to sleep every night. Maybe something different would do us good.”

Arik’s gut churned again. But a good churn. The kind he hadn’t felt in a long time. “Makes sense.”

“Just because they’re dead doesn’t mean we need to be dead.” June draped her arms around Arik’s neck and gently pulled his head to her face.

Arik’s lips touched hers. His body quivered. “I like that.” He smiled. “A lot.” He wrapped his arms around her and kissed her again.

## 8. Family

Saturday, April 1, 2000.

The minister motioned June and Arik to face the church audience. “It’s my pleasure to introduce you to Mr. and Mrs. Arik and June Williamson. They asked me to also announce why they chose April 1 for their wedding date.”

Somebody in the crowd shouted, “Honeymoon discounts?” The crowd laughed.

The minister continued. “Well, that’s part of it.” Polite laughter. “But they want you to know they were both fools before they found God, and now they’re fools for each other. So, what day would be more fitting for their union and anniversary than April Fool’s Day? You may now kiss the bride.”

Arik lifted June’s veil and kissed her. It was even better than their first kiss on New Year’s Eve.

The crowd cheered.

The minister beamed. “You’re all invited to the reception.”

#####

Two months later, June jumped out of bed, ran to the bathroom, and threw up.

Arik followed. “You okay?”

June wiped her face. “I think so. I need to take a pregnancy test. They’ll have some at the hospital.”

“You’re going to work today after you puked?”

“Puking in the morning is normal in your first trimester.”

“Wait...what?”

“Arik, I’m a nurse. I know what pregnancy looks like.”

Arik plopped against the wall. “We’re gonna be parents?”

“I think so. I’ll let you know tonight after work.”

“We can’t raise a baby in this apartment.”

June touched his hand. “We’ll figure something out.”

#####

Five months later, the ultrasound technician smiled at June and Arik. “Do you want to know?”

June and Arik glanced at each other and nodded. “Yeah.”

“She’s a girl.”

June and Arik squeezed each other’s hands.

June wiped a tear. “I want to name her April. Because her mom was an April bride named June. And since we conceived in June, we’ll name her April.”

Arik chuckled. “Yeah, that works.” He took a breath. “But I still don’t know where we’re gonna live or how we’ll pay for it.”

#####

The next day, Arik reported for work at Granite City HVAC and checked the job schedule.

Bill walked by. “Arik, can I see you in my office for a minute?”

Arik followed Bill down the hall and into his office.

“Close the door. Have a seat.” Bill stepped behind his desk and sat.

Arik closed the door and sat in front of Bill's desk.

"There's no easy way to do this, so I won't beat around the bush. We found three thousand dollars of missing equipment in your service van. I have to let you go."

Arik's guts clenched. "What?"

"Arik, I gave you a second chance. But equipment has been walking out of here the past several months and now we found some of it in your van. What am I supposed to think? I can't trust you."

"I don't know what to say. I didn't take it."

"Then how did it get in your van?"

"I don't know."

"You drinking again?"

"No. I told you two years ago, I'm not going back to that."

Bill reclined in his chair. "You also told me substance abusers are the biggest liars in the world."

Arik nodded. "Yeah."

Bill took a breath. "I don't have a choice here. But I'll tell ya what. If equipment still turns up missing, I'll take you back. Because then I'll know it wasn't you."

Arik stood. "Well, thanks for the job. I didn't take your equipment and I can't afford to sit around hoping you'll call back some day."

Bill extended a hand.

Arik glanced at Bill's hand, opened the office door, and trudged into the common area.

One of the guys asked, "What happened?"

"Bill fired me."

“For what?”

“He said some missing equipment turned up in my van.”

“Too bad, so sad. Here’s the world’s smallest violin playing for you.” Lucius Zeeman rubbed his finger and thumb together and chuckled in a corner.

Arik stopped in his tracks and balled his fists. No. Don’t do it. He’s not worth it.

Roger McCalister approached Arik. He looked stricken. “Ignore Lucius. I’m sorry he’s such a prick. He probably planted that stuff in your van.”

“I know.” Arik strode away.

Roger caught up with him. “Let me walk out with you. I saw a job opening in Onamia you might be interested in. I was thinking about applying myself, but I don’t want to live out in the middle of nowhere. They’re building this new resort on Mille Lacs Lake named Norra lekplatsen and they need a construction crew. The pay looks pretty good and the job should last a couple years. Maybe more if they expand it.”

They stepped outside the building. The door swung shut.

Arik stopped and extended a hand. “Thanks, Roger. I’ll check it out. Who do I call?”

Roger shook Arik’s hand. “The details are on a sheet on the bulletin board. Give me a minute and I’ll make you a copy.”

“Thanks.”

Roger bounded back in. He returned a couple minutes later and handed a paper to Arik. “This has everything.”

Arik looked it over. “Yeah, thanks.” He shook his head. “Quite a day.”

“Listen, Arik, I gotta tell you something. You’re gonna think this is weird. But I saw this opening yesterday, and, last night, a voice in my head told me to give this to you.”

Arik nodded. And smiled, in spite of himself. “No. Not weird at all. This was meant to be. Thanks for telling me that.”

They shook hands again. Arik headed to his car and drove away. This time, with his head held high. You’re in my corner, right, God?

## 9. Onamia

Arik wandered back to that same observation deck above the old granite quarry from so long ago. A black crow cawed from a nearby tree.

Like always, Les was waiting. “I see you didn’t have the guts to do the job yourself.”

“Listen, Les, I’m sorry.” Arik extended a hand.

Les grabbed it and pulled Arik through the back railing and over the edge.

Arik tumbled. The ground rose to meet his face. He would be dead in an instant. Sweet relief.

He woke. The bed bounced. His heart pounded. He was at home, next to June. Blessed with a wife and family he didn’t deserve. The TV blared—2003 was one hour old. They’d both fallen asleep before midnight. Their twenty-one-month-old baby was asleep in her room in the modest house they had found near Onamia, Minnesota, with a monthly mortgage payment less than the apartment rent back in St. Cloud.

Four- and one-half years clean. With add-ons and additions, the construction job still going strong and paying well. But the nightmares never went away. Neither did the guilt. No matter how anyone packages it, I killed Russ and I may as well have killed Lana. And Les and his family are still out there. He padded to the bathroom and splashed water on his face.

#####

Arik sat with Pastor Kevin in the Onamia church office. “I moved all the way out here and he still haunts me. What do I do?”

Kevin leaned back in his chair and stroked his chin. “Been almost fifteen years, right?”

“Yeah. Ten years drunk. Coming up on five years clean and sober.”



“You really think this Les and his family are out to murder you?”

“With my rational side, no. But that doesn’t make the fear go away.”

Kevin nodded. “I think you already know what you need to do.”

“Kevin, I killed his brother. I can’t just drive over to his house and say, ‘hey, will you forgive me?’”

Kevin spread his palms. “No, probably not. Maybe approach him with a letter. Or a phone call.”

Arik folded his arms and looked down. “I can’t. Just thinking about that makes my chest tight.”

Kevin nodded. “This anxiety won’t go away on its own. You need to face it, head on. You’re ready, and that’s the only way to get past it.”

Arik looked down.

Kevin reached for a Bible. “Let me read you a few lines from John Chapter twenty-one, starting at verse fifteen. This might be useful.” He found the passage and read:

When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?”

“Yes, Lord,” he said, “you know that I love you.”

Jesus said, “Feed my lambs.” Again, Jesus said, “Simon son of John, do you love me?”

He answered, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.”

Jesus said, “Take care of my sheep.”

The third time he said to him, “Simon son of John, do you love me?”

Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, “Do you love me?” He said, “Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you.”

Jesus said, “Feed my sheep. Very truly I tell you, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go.

Kevin looked up. “Does that make sense?”

Arik shook his head. “Not really. I never did get what was going on in that passage.”

Kevin put his Bible down. “Okay. Back up to a few days earlier at the Last Supper with Jesus and His disciples. You remember how Jesus told Peter that Peter would deny he knew Jesus three times that very night, before the rooster crowed the next morning?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay. And Peter said, no way, he would defend Jesus, no matter what. Right?”

“Yeah. It’s a famous story.”

“So, imagine the scene later that night. Judas betrayed Jesus and the Romans hauled Jesus away. It’s pretty much pandemonium and now Peter is afraid somebody’s going to grab him. So, he’s standing there, and somebody says, ‘hey you – I know you. You were with Jesus’s entourage.’ And, of course Peter says, ‘no way.’ And the guy says, ‘Yeah you were, I saw you.’ And Peter denies it more strongly. And then the third time, Peter says, ‘look, I’ve never even met this guy.’ And then across the courtyard, Jesus makes eye contact. And then a rooster crows and Peter realizes what he just did. How do you think he felt after that?”

“Pretty bad, I guess.”

“Full of guilt, maybe?”

“Yeah.”

“Why?”

“Because Peter said he would defend Jesus, no matter what, but then choked a few hours later when things got tough.”

“Yep. So, do you think Peter had nightmares?”

“Probably.”

“Do you think Peter probably visualized all the brave actions he could have taken, but didn’t?”

“Yeah, probably.”

“So, now what do you think is going on in that passage I read to you?”

“Jesus keeps asking Peter if he loves him. Peter keeps saying yes and Jesus tells Peter to feed his sheep.”

“What does feed the sheep mean, and why keep repeating it?”

“Well, ‘feed the sheep’ means give followers what they need. Maybe Jesus kept repeating it because Peter was dense.”

“Okay. Let’s try it this way. Arik, do you respect me?”

“Sure.”

“Then feed my sheep. Meaning, take good care of the people who depend on you.”

“Okay...”

“So, do you respect me?”

“Yeah. I just said so.”

“Then feed my sheep. Do you respect me?”

“I just told you, yeah. Why keep repeating it?”

Kevin smiled. “Why do you think?”

“To drive it home?”

“Partially. But mostly, to show I have confidence in you. That’s the message Jesus wanted Peter to hear. Peter, if you love me, then stop wallowing in guilt and take on this mission I’m giving you. It’s about the most powerful forgiveness story in scripture.”

Arik tilted his head and thought about that for a few seconds. “Wait—it’s a forgiveness story?”

“Yeah. Peter was broken until Jesus forgave him. Your situation doesn’t parallel Peter’s exactly, but you’re also broken and need forgiveness. God has a mission for you, but you need forgiveness to get ready.”

“I keep hearing that. That old man said the same thing the night Lana died. But he never told me what this mission is or how I’m supposed to do it.”

Kevin’s eyes sparkled. “Maybe you’re supposed to take care of your business first. What’s your ninth AA step?”

Arik sighed. “I know. It eats at me. ‘Make direct amends to such people wherever possible except when to do so would injure them or others.’”

“If you approach Les with an apology, will it injure him or anyone else?”

“I don’t know. Maybe. Maybe it brings a bunch of bad memories.”

“You could write him a letter.”

Arik rubbed the back of his neck. “You make it sound so simple.”

Kevin nodded. “Simple, yes. Easy, probably not. But I get this overpowering sense this is what God wants you to do. You need to reach out to Les.”

Arik snapped his fingers. “Just like that?”

“Yep. Just like that. ‘Let us then approach God’s throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.’”

“What’s that from?”

Kevin smiled, ear to ear. “Hebrews, chapter 4, verse 16.”

Arik rubbed his eyes. “You’ve given me a lot to think about.”

“Don’t think too long. I get a sense you need to do this quickly.”

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Three weeks later, Arik fought a lump in his throat as he finished his letter to Les. His shaky handwriting was the best he could manage.

Dear Les,

Fifteen years ago, in a fit of stupid, teenage rage, I killed your brother, Russ. Since then, not one day has passed when I didn't wake up regretting what I did. I know nothing will bring Russ back, but I would like to meet with you face to face whenever convenient for you and apologize in person to you and your family. I owe you at least that. Would that be possible?

- Arik Williamson

A letter from Les arrived a few days later.

Dear Arik,

Thank you for writing. I've seen you over the years and wanted to talk to you for a long time but never had the courage to reach out. Yes. Let's meet. Please call me and we'll figure out details over the phone.

Les shared his phone number and signed the letter, Les Moreau.

Arik put the letter down and took a deep breath. His hands shook. His guts churned.

"God, I'm supposed to trust you. I don't think I can do this alone." His legs carried him to the wall phone. His hand picked up the receiver. His finger dialed. His elbow bent and put the phone to his ear. It rang. And rang again. And again. One more time. He willed his arm to hang up the phone, but his arm would not obey. One more ring.

A man answered. "Hello?"

"Um." Arik froze. "Um." Something took control of Arik's voice. "Hi. Is this Les Moreau?"

The other voice paused for several seconds. "Yes." Another several seconds. "Is this Arik?"

“Yes. Um. I wanted to—.” Arik fought it. “I owe you—.” Now he fought tears. “I’m sorry. I wanted to say, I’m sorry. But I want to meet face to face. Can we do that?”

“Yes.”

“Well, okay, um, what’s a good time and place?”

“Saturday. Noon?”

“Yeah. That works. Where?”

“I was thinking about that after I read your letter. How about that same quarry? We both know how to find it. That’s where everything happened.”

Arik nodded. Even though nobody could see him. “Yeah. I can do that. I went there about five years ago after Lana died.”

“I know. I followed you there after the accident.”

Arik fought to control his breathing. “Oh. I didn’t see you.”

“I know. Is it okay if I bring my parents?”

“Yeah. I need to tell them, too.”

“That sounds good. I’ll see you Saturday at noon, then.”

“Thanks.”

“For what?”

“For seeing me. After. Um. You know.”

“You’re welcome.”

## 10. Forgiveness

Saturday, June 7, 2003. 11:45 a.m.

Fifteen years, three days, fourteen hours after Russ died. Four years, eleven months, three days, thirteen hours, forty-five minutes after Lana died.

Arik left his car in the Quarry Park parking lot and made his way over the trails to the observation deck again. Just like five years ago. And ten years before that. With each step, his mind screamed, turn back, but his feet carried him forward. The observation deck came into view. Four people. One paced. The other three sat on the bench inside the railing.

He moved closer. An older man and woman sat. A younger man paced. That must be Les. A younger woman sat with the older man and woman. A sister, maybe?

Les looked up and stepped toward Arik.

Arik stopped. God, what's going on? Am I supposed to die here? He took a couple tentative steps.

Les raised his hands as if he wanted to hug. He said something. Too far away to hear.

Arik stepped closer.

"Thanks for coming. Come on up." Les looked like he had been crying.

Arik stepped up onto the deck.

Les grabbed Arik and embraced him. "Arik. You don't know half of what happened that night. I am so sorry." Les released his embrace.

Arik staggered a few steps back. "You're sorry? Why? I, I, I killed your brother. I'm the one who should be sorry. It's been fifteen years and not a day goes by that I don't relive what I did." He turned to the old man and woman. "Are you Russ and Les's mom and dad?"

They nodded. The dad extended a hand. "I'm Martin. This is my wife, Loraine."

Arik stepped back up. They shook hands.

“This is our daughter, Les’s sister, Nancy.” They also shook hands.

Arik did his best to hold the tears in. He made eye contact with each person in the Moreau family, one by one. “I am so sorry for what I did. I spent ten years trying to kill myself because of that, and then another five years trying to run from it.” He broke down and bawled.

Les gently guided him to a bench.

Arik worked to compose himself.

Martin spoke up. “Les needs to tell you about our side of it. Is that okay?”

Arik nodded.

“We also went through hell.”

Arik teared up again. “I’m so sorry.”

“And we forgive you,” Martin said. “We forgave you a long time ago. But you don’t know everything. That’s why we’re here.”

“What don’t I know? I got mad because of a stupid bad call at a baseball game and I murdered your brother. I should have gone to prison.” Arik wiped his eyes.

Les nodded. “You got mad at my brother and you pushed him through the railing. And I was mad at you for a long time. We all were. That part’s true. But what’s also true is, you had no way to know that railing was rotted. And you also had no way to know why Russ and I were really here that night.”

Arik looked up. “What?”

Les took a couple steps back. “Russ was running a sex ring. I was helping him. I wanted to recruit you to help us. Russ didn’t know you, but after you pounded that ball, I wanted your



muscle on our side. I invited you that night so Russ could meet you.” Les pursed his lips. “Russ died because I set you up.”

Arik’s guts churned even more. “What?”

“After Russ died, Nancy found out what we were doing and told Mom and Dad. They put a stop to it. I came to realize what we did was wrong and that’s why I became a cop—to try and make up for it, at least a little bit. I don’t know how many people we hurt.”

Les looked down. “I’d heard you were pretty messed up after Russ died, but I was afraid all those years to come see you. When you and I saw each other after the accident, I didn’t know what to do or say. I was still afraid to tell you because of everything you went through. And at that AA meeting when you saw me—that was when I was going to finally tell you, but you looked so happy, and I panicked. That’s why I left in such a hurry.” Les wiped tears from his eyes. “Arik, I’m sorry.”

They talked for hours, and as Arik drove home around dusk, a million-pound weight lifted from his shoulders. After fifteen years of oppression, he was free. “Thank you, God.”

## 11. Mission

Arik parked and bounded inside his house near Onamia, Minnesota. “June, it was amazing. They forgave me. And I’m not afraid anymore. I can feel it. It’s gone.”

June stepped out of the bedroom, crying.

“What’s wrong?”

“Sit down.” June guided Arik to the couch.

“Is April okay?”

“She’s fine.”

“Well, what’s wrong?”

June fidgeted. “They scared me. Badly.”

“Who?”

“You remember Dyani, the lady who babysits April when I’m we’re at work?”

“In the little house by the church, right?”

“Yeah. She has a daughter, Leilani, about four or five and she plays with April. Anyway, I met her husband today. His name is Mukwoh.”

“Okay.”

“He was drunk.”

“I spent ten years drunk.”

“I know. But the house felt cold today.”

“How could it feel cold? It’s nice outside.”

June shook her head. “Not that kind of cold. They’re afraid of him.”

The lightbulb inside Arik’s head flashed. “Oh.” He took a breath. “Did he hurt April?”

“No. I don’t think so. But she was alone with them while I was at work. She cried herself to sleep after I picked her up.”

“Oh, no.”

“But that’s not all. The police had to arrest three drunks in the ER during my shift today.”

“Were they—”

“Yeah, they were all Native American. People come in drunk all the time. Men and women, but mostly men. Today, they were just nasty. One tried to stab a police officer.”

“Oh, June, I’m so sorry.”

“Just shut up and hug me. I need my husband, who’s a good man.”

Arik spread his arms. June slid next to him and they embraced.

Arik used one hand to wipe his eyes. After a while, he said, “June, I could have been Mukwoh or any one of those guys. I’m not a good man.”

June released her embrace and took both his hands. “Yes, you are. You’re compassionate, you’re courageous, you’re a mechanical genius. I see God working in you every day.”

Arik shook his head. “I’m a mess. I was a cocky high school kid, I killed Russ, wasted ten years, killed Lana, and I spent the next five years, right up until this afternoon, paranoid about it. I barely make enough money for us to live. I know God forgives me, but that doesn’t make me into any superhero.”

It was June’s turn to wipe tears. “You’re a good father to April, a good husband to me, and you faced up to your past.”

Arik kept his hands in hers and tried to wipe his face with a shoulder.

June laughed through tears. “I’m sorry. Work today made me upset. And then when I met Mukwoh, that got to me. I just needed to talk with you about it.” June looked down and then back up. “I know you don’t wear a cape. But you’re still my superhero.”

Arik smiled through tears.

“Arik, maybe that’s your mission.”

Arik let go of June’s hands and wiped his eyes. “Do I need a cape?”

June’s eyes sparkled. “Your cape is your saws and hammers and tools. And your heart. That’s your mission. Just be you. We live here now, in this community. St. Cloud and everything that happened there is in the past. Going forward, model what God wants. Be an example. Be the dad April needs and the husband I need. And I’ll be the mom and wife April and you need. Don’t you see? That’s your mission. That’s what that angel tried to tell you that night at the quarry fifteen years ago.”

Arik teared up again. “I love you.”

“I love you too, you big dumb Swede.”

## 12. Dyani

Friday, August 1, 2014

Arik packed his tools into the truck bed toolbox, parked next to the Onamia church. As the unofficial church handyman, he had finally found the refrigerant leak, repaired it, and refilled the system. Now the church air conditioner should be good for at least the rest of the summer.

Dyani approached.

Arik closed his toolbox and turned to greet her. She had dark bags under her bloodshot eyes. Her hair was disheveled. “Dyani, what’s wrong?”

“Leilani’s gone.”

“Where’d she go?”

“Doesn’t matter. She got into that college work-study program with that new resort.” She shook her head. “Mukwoh left. And now Leilani’s gone. I’m alone.”

Arik shook his head. “No, you’re not. We’ll help get you through this.” He reached for his new cell phone and called June.

### 13. Note to readers

Curious about how a global human trafficking ring will ensnare Leilani, Dyani, and an entire community, and the role Arik and a small-town northern Minnesota church will play fighting back? If you like redemption stories, you'll love [Trafficking U](#).

Thanks to my grandson, Zeke, for standing in as Aric Williamson pondering his life at the edge of an observation deck.

Thanks to the community in the Facebook group, Cops and Writers, for guidance on next of kin notifications. My early draft showing how Aric found out Lana died was way off. Thank you for helping me fix it.

Thanks to the community in the Facebook group, Ask a Book Editor, for guidance on how to handle a pastor quoting the Bible quoting Jesus over multiple paragraphs. Do a block quote, they said. Sounds so simple, but I would not have come up with it on my own. Also, thanks for the help with the copyright paragraph acknowledging NIV trademark holder, Biblica, and Zondervan, NIV publisher.

Thanks to the website, <https://www.biblegateway.com>, for the NIV Bible quotes.

Of course, thanks to God for letting me interview Arik Williamson to learn his backstory after Arik hinted at it in [Trafficking U](#). I know Arik is fictional, but to authors, characters are as real as any family member. If you want to meet a few more of characters from my novels, find them at <https://www.dgregscott.com/a-few-people/>.

And thank you for reading this story. If you like, feel free to send me feedback at [ggregscott@dgregscott.com](mailto:ggregscott@dgregscott.com)

- Greg Scott, April 1, 2025
- A fool for God