



BENT

by

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## Prologue

Geraldine.

She probably didn't mean to kill me.

Or maybe she did.

I'm not sure it matters anymore.

## Chapter 1

"My name's Sam and I'm an addict. I've been clean for two years." Sam licked his lips. A sure sign of a life spent in the pursuit of dope. There were other signs too, like his yellowing eyes and trembling fingers.

"Hi Sam," echoed a smattering of people seated in the basement of the church. I lifted my head from my hands and mouthed the mantra. Like saying hi was gonna keep Sam off the juice. Whoever came up with that shit was an idiot. I shook my head, and listened to Sam confess his addict sins, waiting for him to wind down. Blah, blah, blah. Life sucks and then you die.

He went on for what seemed like an eternity. The hot basement grew hotter as minutes ticked by, the sun outside baking the blacktopped streets just above our heads.

As I nodded off, a burst of cooling breeze swept over the back of my neck. Fifteen heads swiveled to the open doorway and the shapely woman in it. Hidden in the shadows, it was

impossible to tell what she looked like, but a stirring of something crawled up my spine.

She crossed the room, slowly, with measured steps. In the fluorescent light, her eyes glowed money green. Golden hair curled around her shoulders, and a dark beauty mark marred her pale skin, just above the curve of her upper lip. I glanced around for Joe DiMaggio or JFK, anyone to play beau to her Marilyn. But no one stepped up to the plate.

Sam cleared his throat. "Meeting started at 1:00."

"Oh. Sorry." Her hand went to her mouth. "Should I leave?"

Please, no.

It had been much too long since I'd felt the stirring of lust, or anything for that matter. My fingers flexed, drawing the notice of my sponsor, Bill, seated next to me. He frowned, eyes damning the naked thoughts inside my brain. Bill wasn't a bad guy, just caught up in the whole twelve-stepper hype. Like a lame prayer and brotherly love could keep my junkie sane.

Sam paused, eyes drifting to the deep-v between the woman's breasts. "No. Have a seat. We were just about to go around the room and introduce ourselves." His tongue flicked out, wetting his pudgy lips. "Why don't you start?"

She flipped her hair back, and slithered into a chair at the front of the room. "My name's Geraldine."

That was it.

My name is Geraldine.

A quick smile touched my lips.

"And?" Sam pressed.

She shrugged, her white sweater emphasizing every movement. My smile turned into a chuckle that earned me a glare from Bill. I held up an apologetic hand. "Sorry, mate."

Sam shook his head. "How long has it been since you used?"

"Oh, that. Let's see. Ten days?" She trailed a manicured nail across her pink lips. The sleeve of her sweater floated upwards, showing off toned arms and fading yellow bruises. She quickly tugged it down.

My body hardened, almost to an embarrassing level, and I shifted in my seat. Don't think about it.

Ten days.

Fuck.

If I tried, I could smell the bitter scent of smack on her.

"Please join me in welcoming Geraldine." Sam glanced around the room, his eyes falling on me for the briefest of seconds. I slid farther down in the uncomfortable metal seat. It creaked in protest, calling the unwanted attention of the other addicts in the room.

Geraldine glanced over, and winked.

Double fuck.

An hour later, Sam closed the meeting with the sobriety prayer. "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change..."

I mumbled along with the prayer, hating sobriety and myself. I'd been clean for two months now, thanks to methadone and the state of California. Two months too long. The memories heroin had kept buried deep inside skirted my conscious mind.

The prayer ended. I stood, shaking off the numbing effects of heat, stale coffee, and sordid stories of life as an addict. I needed a cigarette, and I wouldn't have said no to beer either. But the courts frowned on that, so I headed up the stairs to smoke, my boots echoing in the empty stairwell.

At the top, I pushed through the church doors, careful not to disturb the old Latino women lighting candles for the dead in the archway. Keep one burning for me, I thought as I trudged passed.

Outside, I pulled a pair of black shades over my dilated pupils and lit a cigarette up, sucking a stream of smoke deeply into my lungs. Sunlight filtered through the smog hanging over Hollywood Boulevard. The temperature hovered around eighty degrees, but I shivered against the Santa Ana winds, the demon winds as natives say.

Slowly the basement addicts slipped by, careful to avoid my gaze. I was, in recovery terms, poisonous, biding my time until I could use again.

Bill stopped in front of me, wiping streams of sweat from his wide forehead. "I'm here for you, you know."

"Thanks," I said, meaning it. A sucker was born every minute.

"Give yourself a chance, son." His hand touched my shoulder. I flinched. Since kicking, any contact sent bolts of electricity along my sensitive nerves. Bill continued, "Take things one day at a time--"

"Excuse me." Beautiful blonde Geraldine squeezed passed, her hip brushing my groin. The electricity that burned through me this time wasn't unpleasant. I grinned, stepping back an inch.

She waved to the cigarette in my hand. "Can I borrow one of those?"

Hell, why not? I pulled out a half-empty pack, shaking out a bent cigarette.

"Thanks." Taking it from my fingertips, the soft edges of hers brushed my calloused ones. Another spark of something shot across my skin. I flicked my lighter. The flame wavered against the winds, flipping back and forth until it finally went out.

I lit it again, and this time the flame stayed true. She took a long drag, smoke curling inward towards her pink-lined lips. Her eyes flashed over me, quickly, dismissively, as if she knew everything about me by the tilt of my chin and the shine of boots. Worse, what she saw was somehow lacking. I grinned; used to being overlooked, in fact, I relied on it. Like a cockroach, a grifter's survival depended on slipping into the shadows. Rule # 1 in my con handbook.

She blew out a stream of smoke. It hung in the air for the briefest of seconds before the heated winds swept it away.

Bill smiled at Geraldine, a genuine smile of ignorance, desire, and hope. A mark's smile. The poor bastard. I'd seen that smile before, in the mirror a time or two. Somewhere in Bill's brain, he must've understood she was out of his league, dangerous even, but the twitching in his penis overrode that caution.

Bill turned to her, giving me his back. "Was today your first meeting?"

Geraldine bit her bottom lip, dragging it across an even row of ivory white teeth. The beauty mark quivered slightly, enough that I questioned its origin. Press-on moles? Do they sell those? In my musing, I'd missed her answer. Damn.

Bill was saying, "If you need a sponsor, I'm available."

I bet you are, Billy-boy. Too bad, Narcotics Anonymous had strict rules about fraternization with the junkie enemies. Not that anyone besides Sam, and maybe Bill paid much attention. Hell, two weeks ago I'd been blown in the loo by a soccer-mom Ritalin addict. But Bill was a N.A. man, from his pressed suit jacket to his cheap-standard issued haircut.

"That would be great," Geraldine said, a small tear gathering prettily in her eye. I gave a mental golf-clap. She sniffed. "Sometimes I just don't know where to turn. My ex-boyfriend...He...I'm so scared. He left me with no money or place to go...."

BRAV-fucking-O. She was good, I'd give her that. In a matter of an hour, she'd picked the easiest mark and roped him in. Not so fast, girlie, I thought. Bill was my sponsor and in some twisted way, I felt like I owed him.

Besides, the guy had two kids at home and worked as a manager at a fast food joint. How much more shit did he deserve? Before he could fuck everything up by offering her money or a place to stay, I moved into her line of sight.

Reaching into my pocket, I pulled out a hundred. "Here." I pressed it into her hand. "Get a room at the motel across the street, and hide out until you feel safe. That way you won't miss tomorrow's meeting."

Her green eyes glared down at the money, but her tone remained neutral. "Thank you, sugar."

"No problem." I smirked. "Your being in recovery is thanks enough."

Bill beamed his approval. "Ben, you've come a long way and I'm proud of you."

"Thanks, that means a lot." I let him pat me on the back. My eyes fixed on Geraldine's face. What I saw there wasn't pretty. Had looks actually been able to kill, I'd have been coffin bait. I winked, and turned my attention to Bill. "Do you mind giving me a ride to the clinic?"

"Of course not." He pulled a set of jangling keys from his pocket. "I'm about a block up. I'll pull around and pick you up." Nodding in Geraldine's direction, Bill headed off, huffing and puffing his way to his ugly green mini-van.

Geraldine stood. "Sorry, I didn't catch your name."

"Ben."

"Well Ben." Her talon-like nails twisted the monopoly money I'd slipped to her. Over the sounds of the boulevard traffic, the distinct chorus of ripping paper resonated. She tossed the bits of shredded counterfeit cash at me. "Can't say it's been a pleasure."

I laughed, brushing away the fake paper. "Can't win 'em all."

"We'll see about that." Picking up her bag and dropping her cigarette at my feet, she flashed me a devious smile before disappearing down the street.

Fuck. I was already half in love.

## Chapter 2

Ten blocks up, Bill dropped me off. I waved goodbye and headed into the Hollywood BAART Clinic, a seedy substance abuse treatment facility funded by Medical and the good-old city of angels.

The place smelled of human waste and bleach. A line of addicts waited on cracked plastic chairs, hunched over, eyes vacant. I picked a number, 89, and sat down to wait my turn.

I'd read somewhere that the average citizen in Los Angeles spends over sixty-two minutes a day waiting, for the bus, to see a doctor, in line at Starbucks. Now double that number for a junkie. That equaled out to roughly 1,900,920 minutes of the 22,075,200 minutes of a junkie's life spent waiting on hard plastic benches. No wonder I had hemorrhoids.

On my fingers, I double-checked my math. Forty-two times 22,630...Blah, close enough.

I glanced around the crowded room. What had brought them here? Was it chance or choice? And either way, did it matter? Were they like me, blowing time until the needle sunk beneath their skin once again?

I smiled at a woman, two seats up, who rocked an eerily quiet baby. She looked like a typical junkie: thin, pale, and hopeless. Broke and broken. But the man on my right was far worse off, smelling like cheese and not the pleasant cheddar kind.

Another guy sat down on my left, his hair stood on end, a large steel stud poked through his septum, and a ring of tattoos covered his neck. His flingers twitched and his leg bounced to a musical frequency all his own. Tweaker. God I hated meth-heads. They gave dopers a bad name.

Amazingly enough, like animals in the wild, dopers had their own hierarchy, which went something like: pill poppers, pot-smokers, cokeheads, smack addicts, crackheads, and way down at the bottom, right above pedophiles and politicians, were tweakers.

"Hey bro. You look like that fag...in that movie." The tweaker pointed at me, drool slipping from his twitching lips.

"I'm not." I shrugged. I'd looked like many blokes over the last few years depending on the state of my addiction. Only three months ago, I resembled the Grim Reaper. Since kicking,

I'd put twenty pounds on my six-foot frame and lost that hollow, blank-eyed stare. But I couldn't shake the stench of death. Everywhere I went it followed, like a crazy-eyed one night-stand.

The tweaker's eyes blinked repeatedly. "The movie with the cowboys...."

I groaned, shaking my head. Don't say it, I thought. That fucking movie had ruined my life. So I had a slight Australian accent and a similar build to one of the stars. Big deal, it didn't mean I was him for fuck's sake. Was I wearing a cowboy hat? Or a pink feather boa?

Tweak-boy didn't hear my denial or care. He continued, scratching his greasy head, "I hate fags. You see what they're doing to this country. And when did cowboys start sucking dick?"

"When sheep stopped putting out?" I chuckled at my joke, but the tweaker looked right through me. I patted him on the back and said, "It was a joke."

His eyes narrowed. "Oh, I get it. Funny."

Fuck'em. I'd never claimed to be a comedian. Thankfully, a nurse hidden behind bulletproof glass called my number before Tweak-boy could entice me into further debate about the decline of civilization. I rose, careful to step over a pile of vomit drying on the grayish carpet.

"What can I do for you?" She pulled a steel drawer embedded in the glass towards her. Green rings stained the drawer's veneer, like the edge of the nurse's teeth. Guess the clinic didn't provide dental.

"I'm here for my daily dose." Polite. Calm. Collected.

She stared, blank-faced. "Methadone?"

"Yeah." Fuck. I'd been coming to the clinic everyday for two months. You'd think she'd have recognized me. A six-foot junkie who kinda resembled a gay cowboy and Death? Come on. I bit my tongue and took a deep breath. "I'm due for 83 mg."

Her eyes widened as they did every day when I announced my poison. 83 mg was a big dose of methadone. Only hardcore addicts and celebrities scored that much. I, of course, fit into the first category.

I'd been a heroin addict since dropping out of medical school at age twenty-two. Now at twenty-nine, I'd use up to four grams of smack a day, enough to fit me for a pine box. 83 mg meant shit in comparison.

"Sign here." The nurse passed me a sheet of paper via the steel drawer, careful to avoid any contact. Who knows what sort of diseases she could catch from me: HIV, Hepatitis, or maybe the dreaded Humanity.

I signed the paper, licked the end of my finger, and dragged it across the form. It left a spit-soaked smear. Childish, but satisfying.

Sneering at the wet paper, she said, "California Medical?"

I shook my head, pulling out the wallet I'd jacked from the tweaker. "Cash." Damn. He had thirty bucks and a baggy of meth. I pressed the cash into the drawer, pocketed the meth, and searched my jeans for the rest, coming up with seven dollars and change. Fuck. I pulled off my boot and removed my dooper's twenty. For emergency use only.

Satisfied, she counted out forty-one dollars and slipped my dose of methadone through the window. The green color reminded me of anti-freeze, or those lime green Popsicles I ate as a kid. Ah, the good-old days.

I swallowed the dose in a single gulp, letting the bittersweet mixture slide down my throat. Methadone was the straight-world's joke on the junkie, a double-edged sword of sorts. On it, I felt nothing. No high, no low, and nowhere in-between. I hated that, but the alternative kick was much, much worse: cramps, violent diarrhea, burning cold sweat, tremors, projectile puke, and aching teeth, muscles, joints, and bones, not to mention a psychological craving beyond lust, love or rage.

I'd kicked down cold turkey once before, in a Mexican jail after a weeklong binge. Not a pretty sight. The pain had been so intense I wanted to die. On my arms, razor blade scars from an attempt to make that happen mixed with healing track marks.

"Next," the nurse called, snapping me back to the clinic and the losers like me cut off in the prime of our junkie lives. Blinking slowly, I threw the empty paper cup and the speed freak's empty wallet into the trash labeled, Paper Products Only.

I pushed past the Tweaker heading towards the window, and smiled. A wrinkle formed above his pierced eyebrow, but he said nothing. Pulling on my dark sunglasses, I hit the street. Traffic crawled north, heading to better parts of town, places that offered designer dope instead of quinine cut junk. A row of homeless guys, nodding off against the brick clinic wall, panhandled with flair.

I laughed, reading a couple of the signs. A black dude with acne scars held a cardboard sign, reading: Make more money. Loan me a buck and I'll show you how. A woman with pink hair seated next to him carried a sign that said: Need money for birth control pills. But my favorite one read: Ninja's killed my family; need crank and kung-fu lessons to fight them. Can you spare a dollar? The kid holding it looked about sixteen, with open sores lining his neck and puss-filled zits dimpling his

face. Rotten teeth poked out of his cracked lips. The doctor in me gave him six months. The dooper suspected a month or two less.

I nodded to the three, and dropped the tweaker's meth into the kid's hand. "Good luck to you, brother."

His eyes widened, and he broke into a huge, busted-tooth smile. The other two got just as excited, shaking their signs and laughing. Hollywood was like being inside a zoo. Just don't fuck with the animals.