

## Reap City

Alan awoke to find himself handcuffed to a metal bed frame in an empty, one-bedroom apartment. His senses began to stir as he regained consciousness from whatever unpleasantries had put him under. The air was damp, and it smelled of mold. There was the hustling and bustling of traffic outside the window, but it was somewhat muted. Tracing his tongue around the edge of his lips, he recognized a sharp, earthy taste, but couldn't quite place it. A strip of floral print wallpaper that had most likely begun the peeling process around the late 80s slowly crept down a smoke-stained wall. A roach the size of a lap dog crawled from a crack in the drywall a few inches from the fading rose print. After scurrying about momentarily, it quickly disappeared behind a dusty picture frame with "Galatians 6:7" scribed on a piece of paper where a photograph should have been. The place was a dump.

There was a thud from somewhere in the hallway. Adrenaline quickly setting in, Alan found himself fully alert. Fearing for his life, he finally sprang off of the dingy mattress, allowing his bare feet to grace the cold, grimy tile. He felt a crunch under his foot. Another roach.

*Oh God.*

He immediately found his mobility limited by the cuff around his left wrist, but managed to turn to face a full length mirror anchored into the wall with rusty screws. Clad in only his underwear, Alan felt a pang of embarrassment. He had messed himself, and he reeked of his shame. Now focusing on the split in his lip, he recognized the earlier taste as blood. He was covered in bruises, head to toe, and he assumed that he had pissed someone off in one of his drunken stupors. Nothing out of the ordinary.

Alan ran his hand through his shaggy, dark hair until his fingers came to a crater over his temple. "Jesus Christ!" he stammered. Parting his hair on the side, he saw a deep, circular wound that couldn't have been more than a half-inch in diameter.

*Is that a bullet hole?*

It couldn't be. No way he would have survived something like that. Especially with it being in such a critical area.

The thud in the hallway occurred once more. Alan frantically scanned the room for anything of use, but to no avail. No hack saw, no bolt cutters, and definitely no magic key. However, peeping out from the end of the bed, there was a bobby pin on the floor. Obviously, Alan was no con artist, but he did know how to escape a set of cuffs. Who would have thought that the CEO of one of the nation's largest public relations firms would know how to pick a lock with a woman's hair accessory?

*Oh god. The firm.*

Alan was due to meet with a potential client about representing them in an upcoming political campaign. He had staked his career on this going well, and it all boiled down to whether or not he had his crap together. It was the kind of meeting that you'd screw up only if you would rather see the neighboring McDonalds from the third floor everyday instead of the city's skyline on the twenty-eighth floor.

Shimmying the pin down into the cuff, he maneuvered until he heard a click and felt the release of the metal. He was free. Catching one last glimpse in the mirror, Alan shook his head. A man that usually held himself in the highest esteem, it was almost unbearable for him to see himself like this.

*You're pathetic.*

He shook his head again and left the room.

Stepping into the hallway, he did his best to hide the fact that he was covered in his own feces. However, there was no one to hide it from. In fact, the place looked abandoned. There was no furniture. Only busted light fixtures and shards of glass that testified of great distress. There was no wallpaper, but scratches in the drywall that said “reap” and “sow” over and over and over again. From a distance, it may have looked like the walls were textured, but up close, it was evident that someone had scratched each letter into the sheet rock by hand. Feeling an unknown obligation to contribute, Alan followed suit of his predecessor. He used his fingernail to dig into the grit, and he felt the words come alive.

*Reap. Sow.*

Suddenly, Alan saw movement out of the corner of his eye. It was up ahead and to the left, right as his hallway intersected with another one.

*What the...?*

With his curiosity peeked, Alan surged forward. He rounded the corner to see it again at yet another intersection, but this time he could tell what it was; the hem of some sort of garment. He heard footsteps.

“Hey!” he called out. “You! Hey! Come back here!”

He chased the mysterious figure down two more hallways, a staircase, and out the front door right onto the street.

Any concern for mystery had faded as Alan realized he was still clad in only his soiled underwear. Jumping back into the shadows, he watched as people bustled about. Concerned only with his reputation, he kept his hands over his front.

To his relief, the people took no notice of him, except for a teenage boy across the street. He made direct eye contact with Alan, and he kept his eyes on him for a good 30 seconds or so before turning on his heel to enter an unmarked building behind him. The boy paused only to look back at Alan for a moment, daring him to follow him into the unknown. Desperate for answers, Alan took the bait. It was not without great reluctance, but the need for information outweighed his need for an ego trip at the moment.

Entering the dimly lit building, it took quite a while for his eyes to adjust fully. When they did, Alan could see the boy from the street leaned up against what appeared to be a locker.

*What the hell is this?*

He was surrounded by sports equipment.

*A gym maybe?*

The boy stepped forward and stretched out his hand. Scratched into his wrist, the same mumbo jumbo from the picture frame in the hotel room, only his was abbreviated.

*GAL-VI-VII.*

“So good to see you again! Come on, don’t you recognize me, Al?”

The boy beamed and turned his head to the side, allowing Alan to observe his profile.

“Nothing? Okay, remember this?”

He cleared his throat and began to chant, “W-E-S-T! Showing the world how great we can be! H-I-G-H! Number one high school in the state!”

Alan quickly shook his head, remembering, and suddenly recalled a few basic facts about the odd fellow.

“You went to West High? With me, yeah, you were in my graduating class. Wait... CALVIN?”

The boy grinned, showing his chipped front tooth.

“In the flesh, baby!”

Alan felt a sense of relief, knowing he was now with a former classmate, but the comfort was short lived. His smile faded, as he quickly realized something was terribly wrong.

“No. Wait, I thought... I thought you were, you know. They said you were...” his voice trailed off.

“Dead? That’s what you were going to say, right?”

Calvin’s eyes had changed, and they couldn’t be moved off of Alan. They were darker now, and they fixated on the wound on Alan’s temple. He chuckled.

“Yeah, last I heard, I was. Crazy stuff. But here I am, now. Talking to you.”

Alan began to back away, feeling a strong sense of uneasiness.

“They said you, you know.”

The corners of Calvin’s lips crept into a wicked grin.

“What? Shot myself? Yeah, I did. Blew my damn brains out. Ever wonder why I did that, Al? Ever creep into your thoughts late at night as to why I would do such a thing?”

Sweat gathered on Alan’s upper lip, and his stomach began twisting itself into knots.

“Not... not really. I just thought it was some freak accident.” He backed away still. Alan couldn’t recall anything in particular, especially right now.

“Accident?! Oh, it was no accident. God, you always were stupid. And you didn’t care about anyone but yourself. Especially when you and the rest of the basketball team beat me half to death in the locker room the night before graduation.”

Confused, Alan shook his head rapidly.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Calvin sighed. “Al, I’m disappointed in you, buddy. You remember? We had that lock-in at school with the pizza and the board games. It was supposed to be one of the best nights of my life, but I spent it cowering in a corner with sweaty towels and stiff socks while you all took turns beating me. You stripped me down to my underwear like I was some sort of freak. I felt pathetic. Then the next day, I had to smile and act like nothing had happened. Like I was so proud to be graduating with all of you. But everyone knew. I could feel them watching me at the ceremony, eyeballing the bruises that crept out from under my cap and gown. I felt useless, and when I got home, I knew what I needed to do. I knew I had to end it.”

Tears had formed in Alan’s eyes as Calvin finished his story.

“It was rash; I have to admit. But at least I didn’t have to deal with you assholes anymore. I didn’t have to lie to my mother about where I got those bruises. I didn’t have to wait for whatever ridiculous rumors you would make up to begin flying around town. It was over. Just like it is now.”

A stabbing pain ran through Alan's forehead, nearly crippling him. His vision blurred, but he could still make out Calvin moving toward him with something in his hand. Something silver and shiny. He fell to the floor, shaking violently.

"Oh, you like this? It belonged to my brother," Calvin explained as he handed the pistol off to Alan.

At that moment, something came over Alan that rendered him helpless. He took the pistol in his hand, merely a pawn in some twisted game.

"Now put it to your forehead. Right there," Calvin mentored as he shifted the gun slightly.

Calvin now had blood gushing out of an identical wound over his temple, as well. Alan had no control over his body. He could not pull the gun away from his head, nor could he allow it to slip from his hand.

"Finger on the trigger," Calvin urged.

Alan complied reluctantly, with tears streaming down his face.

"It helped me to count backwards from five. Ready? Five... four..." Calvin began.

Alan shook viciously. "You don't have to do this! Please," he pleaded.

"Sure I do! We haven't missed a day in over eight years," Calvin boasted, continuing to count down. "Three... Two..." He paused, then smiled almost thoughtfully.

"Galatians 6:7. For whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap. See you tomorrow, Al." Calvin winked.

"One."