

The GREATEST
CHOICE

Chris Sorensen

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Culmination

Judge Sander's chamber door sounded like it was made of steel instead of pine as it slammed behind him. He made his way into the courtroom and took a seat at the large bench in front.

It was unusually humid. My shirt felt like it had shrunk, hugging my shoulders with a warm uneasiness. The ceiling fan that leisurely spun above was gracious enough to spread the temperate wealth. My stomach was growling, my eyes were heavy, and I was sweating more than anyone else in the room. Unfortunately, I didn't have the luxury of complaining.

The bailiff stood. "Proceedings for Lewis James Anderson held on the fifth day of July, 1954, at the Wayne county courthouse in the state of Pennsylvania. The honorable Judge..."

"Mr. Anderson," Judge Sanders squawked, interrupting the bailiff who sat down silently, seeming unfazed and used to the routine.

"Yes, your honor," I mumbled softly.

His voice was impatient. "Mr. Anderson, you had better raise your head and look at me when you answer in this courtroom."

His features came into gaze—his graying hair, broad shoulders beginning to slump a little with age, chiseled jaw and large rounded eyes. Even when he squinted his pupils were still discernable.

There was no emotion left in me as I raised my head. "Yes, your honor."

Stinging and unsympathetic the judge repositioned his bifocals and continued in his deep voice. "What did you expect to happen, Mr. Anderson? You have stood before me three times in the last five months. First you received a warning, and considering the damage to Mr. MacKay's mailbox and lawn you got off lucky. Then you were caught driving, let me see...oh, here it is, 'driving like a crazed maniac' in broad daylight down past the school. But what did a three-month suspension of your license do? Absolutely . . ."

I blanked out. None of the facts were new. In the past there may have been some guilt, but my feelings had become numb. The beads of sweat were making their way down the

small of my back. My eyes continued to gaze through Judge Sanders as I waited for the inevitable.

His eyebrows kept creeping up his forehead and his voice got louder... “and I should think it would stand to reason that wrapping your car around a hundred-year-old oak while driving without a license would have knocked some sense into you. Along with a fifty dollar fine, three days behind bars, and revoking your license indefinitely. I was hoping that if you missed work for a while you would realize the seriousness of your choices, but then I found out that you had no job! And now, finally, here we stand, together again,” he said, finishing his dissertation with a small chuckle of disbelief.

A drop of perspiration had settled on the tip of my nose, but I didn't scratch it. I wanted to gently massage the wound under my eye, but I had been holding that in as well.

“Before we go any further Mr. Anderson, one thing that may be of interest to you. In case you can't remember, when you were pulled from your car that was in Mr. Krueger's hardware store window two days ago you were so drunk you could not even stand up long enough to have the handcuffs placed on you. And that nice gash underneath your eye...you did that on the door getting into the patrol car.”

The wreck was an event that, no matter how long I had tried over the last forty-eight hours, I could not remember—though the cut above my left cheek was still throbbing. Everything was still a blur. It was the first time that I couldn't . . .

My train of thought shifted as a noticeable change came over the judge. An air of sympathy promptly transformed his stern face. The main door to the courtroom behind me squeaked close.

“Good morning, Sadie,” he said slowly, almost reverently.

My head involuntarily dropped. Completely sober and with a sudden rush of shame, my emotions turned on. The numbness was gone and it felt like my heart was coming up my throat.

“Morning Judge Sanders,” she said quietly, politely, and then she made her way down the aisle. She sat down a few rows behind me. I didn't turn around to look.

Judge Sanders took in a deep breath and gently shook his head as he shuffled some papers. His hands finally stopped moving and came to rest on top of his desk. He took in another breath, exhaled, and then calmly continued. “Sadie, I sure am sorry to see you down here again. Do you know why Lewis is here today?”

The bench creaked as she stood. “Yes your honor,” she stated, her voice nervous and unsure. Sadie was never one to speak in front of an audience. “I was going to Swisher's Market for Ms. Green the other day and saw the accident at the hardware store. When I saw Lewis drive by in the police car, it didn't take much to put it together.” Judge Sanders nodded respectfully and Sadie sat back down. His mouth opened to speak and then he stopped to remove his glasses and massage his eyes. Sighing, he replaced his glasses and continued. “Thirty days in jail Lewis. That's all I'm going to give you for now. I'll have more for you when you're done sobering up in the county facilities.”

Whatever he wanted to do was fine with me. I just wanted to get away, out of the courtroom, out of Sadie's view.

“I'll see you as soon as you get out and let you know what's next.” He reached for his gavel. “Unlike some of the other men who stand before me who have been drinking all their lives, you are still fairly young. Let's see...twenty-seven. Is that correct Mr. Anderson?”

“Yes sir,” I finally answered, though not giving him the pleasure of looking up again.

“And from everything I’ve gathered this apparently is a recent problem for you. You've got a chance to clean yourself up Mr. Anderson, and I suggest you take it," he finished with a drop of the gavel.

I didn't look at Sadie. I couldn't. The officer led me right past her and I kept my head low, looking down. Allowing my eyes to meet hers wouldn't have done any good anyway.

Uncertain

"Open number three," the officer shouted as his hands tightened around my bicep. The door clamored shut and the musky smell of damp, humid walls caused me to gag. There was going to be nothing routine about this particular visit. The thirty days that awaited me were going to be completely different than any I had ever known—or at least any that I could remember. I walked into my cell and the door slammed behind me and for the first time it was my body, not my mind, telling me I needed a drink.

But that feeling did not last long. After being housed with other guys who had been in for months, or even years, I learned that if you wanted something bad enough you could get it. So on my fourth day of lock up, when I couldn't take it any more, Moses Johnson scored some scotch from one of the officers and gave me a couple of shots. I could feel the difference that two small drinks made. It didn't help my head as much as I would have hoped, but for a brief moment my body could manage.

With a little help from Moses every couple of days, my sentence became almost tolerable. I could handle meal times and work detail. The hardest part was after dinner, when there was nothing to do except think. No matter how bad I wanted to, there wasn't any way to escape my thoughts.

"Lewis," came the voice on the bottom bunk.

"Yeah, Henry."

"You thinking?"

"Not really Henry. Just laying here."

There was silence as Henry thought of a response. Henry was extremely slow on the uptake and had the maturity level of a young child. Everyone said he was just born that way. If asked, Henry would reply honestly that he didn't know how old he was, but it seemed he was in his mid-forties. Unlike most people who usually became annoyed with

his incessant questioning and fidgeting, I could tolerate him. Mostly, I grew to feel sorry for him.

"I was just thinking and wanted to ask you a question." I paused to let him continue, but he was insistent on a response.

"Go ahead Henry, you can ask me," I encouraged, somewhat impatiently.

"Do you suppose you would be willing to stay in this cell with me? It's been kind of nice having somebody to talk to who don't always get mad at you. You've been pretty nice that way and I was wondering . . . I was wondering if there was any way I could talk you into staying?"

I continued to stare at the ceiling as I responded, starting slowly. "Well Henry, I wouldn't mind bunking with you, but I will be out of here in a few weeks. So I won't be staying that long."

He gave my response time to sink in and then continued. "Well, you'll probably be back later, won't you?"

His statement took me by surprise. I leaned over the bunk to look at him. "What do you mean?"

"Well the way I see it," he started, as if stating fact, "it's all downhill from here. It's not like you're really going to stop drinking, right? So whatever happens next will get you in here longer, and then the next thing longer, all the way down until you'll be able to spend all your time in here like me. I just figured I'd ask you about being cell mates now, before somebody else asked you later."

I laid back again firmly on the cot. I didn't respond. I didn't know how to respond. With all the wrangling in my mind I hadn't taken the time to think about the future, I had only been beating myself up over the past. But, when Henry's question sank in and I dared to think about what would happen after I got out of jail, I couldn't help but come up with the same reasoning.

"I don't want to talk anymore Henry. Just go to sleep." He didn't say anything else.

I tried to go to sleep, but my conscience wouldn't let me. Something inside me kept gnawing at me telling me that Henry was right.

It kept me up, harping, focusing, repeating the main gist of what Henry had said, *'It's not like you're really going to stop drinking, right?'*



She sat across the glass, holding her large purse secure in her lap. With every few steps I took she would look at me; not in the eye, but at me and then look back down. The sheer worry of the confrontation caused me to pace my steps rather slowly. It had been a little over three weeks since the courthouse and I had no idea what to say or what to expect. After everything I really didn't expect to see her, at least not so soon.

As I sat in the wooden chair she finally looked me in the eyes, but her expression didn't change. Hesitantly, I picked up the phone and she followed suit. We sat in silence for a few seconds. "Hi," I began simply. She stared at me, lips firm and eyes determined. A few more seconds of silence ensued. I tried to continue.

"I . . . I just . . ." She held her hand up for me to stop, eyes trembling and moist. She brushed her cheek with her fingers, exhaled and took control of the conversation.

"I've had time to think Lewis, probably more than was good for me, but enough to get the job done." My mouth opened to speak, but as she slowly shook her head her eyes told me to say nothing; to sit still and listen.

"Danielle is well and she knows what's going on. We're at your mom's. I didn't see any need to stay in the house since it was just her and me, so we've been keeping her company. We're going to stay there when you get out next week. You'll have the house to yourself. I've been . . ." she paused, her eyes wandering for the words. There was a swelling in my chest and I could feel a moist heat building behind my eyes.

"I've been faithful Lewis. I've been patient, kind, caring, loving, enduring—you name it. All because I believe in you. And even though I know our relationship isn't as bad as some, I think I finally figured out it is worse than most."

Her eyes became fixed and she seemed to calm to a steadier, more confident tone. "I just wanted to come to let you know that I made a promise to stop blaming myself."

As she spoke, it was as if her shoulders floated, like a weight had been lifted—and dropped, dead, square at my feet. Real or not, I could feel her pain hit the floor in front of me.

My feet shuffled under the chair and I tried to make sense out of the sudden emotion, the sudden sickness I felt. "What does that mean 'you promised yourself'?" I asked desperately, yet softly. For a moment I forgot I was in prison and actually, for a moment, sober, I felt like a husband again. It was a pleasant, painful sensation.

She turned away as she wiped her cheek again. There was no answer. The silence got to me.

"What do you want me to do?"

"I want you to change," she said suddenly, quickly, her voice pleading with an undertone of anger and betrayal that made me turn away. Whatever composure she came with was gone. Her voice slowly rose in tone and sharpness as she continued.

"I want you to want to change because you know you need to; not because I want you to, or your mother wants you to, or because Danielle wants you to." She slowed her tone, "not because your father would want you to." The words chosen were not meant to be spiteful, but to merely drive home her point. It worked and I became angry.

"This has nothing to do with Dad," I replied loudly, deeply. The eyes around us paused to stare. The guard perked up and started toward us, but Sadie gently waved him away. Speaking into the phone again I was still angry, but hushed.

"It's not my fault that . . ."

She interrupted, boiling over, teeth clinched. "That is the point Lewis; none of this has been your fault. Quit trying to place blame and just realize everything doesn't work out all the time. I'm sorry you had to stop going to college, I'm sorry that your dad died, and I'm sorry you didn't get the job you were promised. We just have to deal with the things life throws at us. That's why I wanted to be there, so we could do it together. I told you I would always be there, but there was nothing I could do when you didn't let me in. We needed to stay together; you needed to believe in me, not run away."

"It's not that simple Sadie," I pleaded.

"It doesn't matter how it is Lewis. I have always been willing to work together, to get through it together. But you haven't let me in. I saw you struggle and didn't know what to do. You wouldn't let me *do* anything." There was a pause as she gathered her emotions.

Sitting there, hopeless, shoulders sagging, I knew there wasn't anything that could be done.

"Judge Sanders said you get out next week. You do whatever you want Lewis. Your clothes and some food will be at the house; enough to give you something to get through the first couple of days. Danielle and I will not be there."

"Will I get to see you?"

"No, I don't want to see you, not right now. Not for a while. But, of course Danielle does. And it wouldn't be right for me to make it so you couldn't see her. But the only way you will be able to see her is if you go by mom's house while I'm at work," there was a pause, "and if you're sober."

There was no expression on my face. Dazed, I just wanted the conversation to be over. "So this is goodbye," I said as I stood up, pitiful, still looking at the floor. I motioned to the officer to let him know I was finished.

"Wait Lewis," she said. The anger had seemed to subside a little and she was speaking from the part of her that still cared. The guard noticed and halted his step. I slowly put the phone back to my ear.

"I want you to be honest with me – have you had anything to drink since you've been in here?"

I wanted to lie. Standing there, mouth half opened, she knew the answer. She didn't look at me and I didn't look at her. I hung up the phone and the guard opened the door and proceeded to escort me back to my cell. It was the lowest point of my life.

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