

Chapter 1

I asked myself how it all came to this. I stepped outside and blinked away the mist as I looked up at the early morning sky like it would show me the answer — after what I had just witnessed in the warehouse at the harbor, jumping off the dock into the cold bay and ending it all didn't sound like a bad idea.

I reached into the inside pocket of my blood-spattered jacket to get at the soft pack of cigarettes as my mind swam back to a memory that was ingrained in my mind like a ring in a tree stump.

The sun beat down on my shoulders as I wandered through the yard. The only sound was the wind rustling through the eucalyptus trees. My dad ran a small grocery store next door to our house. I opened the gate to walk towards it, but before I could reach the door, he came out and chased me away. "Get back in the yard!" he yelled. I ran back to the house, feeling disappointed. I didn't understand why my dad didn't want me in the store.

If I did it too often, he would tell my mom to give me something to do. That meant household chores that I tried to avoid, like the plague. I tried to stay out of the way. I spent most of my time watching cartoons and eating handfuls of dry cereal out of a box. If I wasn't in school, I was outside digging forts in the dirt, playing war, and riding bikes with a couple of friends. Then, one Saturday morning, all that I knew changed forever.

We went shopping, and I liked it—a rare trip downtown for me as an 8-year-old. My dad thought taking children anywhere was a nuisance. Mom thought differently. She invited my aunts and cousins to tag along. There was strength in numbers. All of us kids would watch out for each other. At least, that was the plan.

A crowd of busy shoppers bustled through the shopping mall, their voices a cacophony of sound. Eye-catching, brightly colored signs flashed and blinked, vying for attention. The smell of roasted peanuts and popcorn emanating from the merchants of impulse filled the air, making my mouth water. The energy and liveliness of the scene thrilled me.

My mind flooded with visions of adventure and the excitement of getting something new. I felt safe, surrounded by my family. My mom picked out clothes and held them up to me to see if they fit.

The women in the family were more accommodating than the men. I might get a toy or something if I asked for it. My dad always said no, and my uncles pretended not to hear me when I asked for something. My cousin Brandy helped me pick out a few things hanging from the pegs on a pegboard. She was a few years older and always looked out for me.

“This is cool. A car is a fun toy to get! You should get this car or that guy on the motorcycle that jumps over stuff.”

“I want a gun! A cap gun that pops! Phew, phew, phew.”

“Don’t get a gun. That’s too violent. Guns are for shooting and hurting people. That’s no good.”

When the morning turned to afternoon, we stopped to get something to eat. The women were talking about things they found. Everything was going well. After a bit, they started asking about where Brandy was. She was just there with us. We were in the middle of lunch, and Brandy had got up from the table and said she’d be right back.

And then she was gone.

I didn’t know what was happening and tried to listen to what they were saying, but I couldn’t understand. I just knew that it was bad. Everyone was on edge, and some were crying.

We searched for Brandy for what felt like an eternity. Then, I heard sirens. The police cars pulled up, and the flashing lights transfixed me. One of

them had a dog, and the dog was growling. I took a step back, my heart pounding in my chest.

The officers' calm demeanor stood in stark contrast to the frantic chaos of my family members as they described the situation. The big cop chewed on a toothpick, his eyes darting around the parking lot. One officer took me aside and gave me a sucker. It was apple-flavored, and the sweet taste was a welcome relief.

After we got home, more authorities showed up, and they wrote more reports of memories. Thoughts that had no other description other than shock and pleas for someone to do something. The sun was setting, and hope was fading.

Family and friends copied pictures to make fliers of Brandy. We stapled and tacked them to telephone poles. Her eyes stared out, pleading for help. They were placed in windows of businesses until time eventually had them torn away by weather or yellowed by the sun.

The phone rang. It was another sighting. Another lead. Another false hope. Some unfortunate people needed the fleeting thrill of being important until we debunked their false leads. On one occasion, my uncle knocked out a false informant.

Everywhere I went, I looked for her: the supermarket, the school carnival, even the baseball or football game on TV. When the camera panned to the crowd, I held my breath and looked for Brandy's face. Watching parades became a ritual of searching.

My cousin Brandy was 12 years old. I did not find her.

Holidays came and went, and each time, someone in the family would inevitably mention Brandy's name. Time passed, and the annual reminder of her birthday would come around. It became a tradition to light a candle in

her memory. Only those who knew Brandy's kind smile and generous heart would remember her.

I grew up in a small town, and the nuns at the local church were always watching. They had eyes in the back of their heads, it seemed, and they knew everything that was going on. I learned early on that it was best to be on my best behavior lest I incur their wrath. I was always on the lookout, wondering if they were watching me. It made me cautious and paranoid, but it also taught me to be vigilant.

My mother's eyes lit up whenever she talked about the priesthood. She would tell me stories about the saints, and how they had dedicated their lives to God. She would tell me how proud she would be if I became a priest.

I loved my mother, and I wanted to make her happy. But I also wanted to experience life. I wanted to fall in love, and have a family of my own. So, I told my mother I didn't want to become a priest. She was disappointed, but she understood. She gave me medals of various saints to inspire and protect me. I still have those medals today. They remind me of my mother's love and of the sacrifices she made for me.

Sports were a welcome distraction from my poor grades. A knee injury during a football game gave me an unwelcome companion for the rest of my life. It would flare up and subside as it pleased. At 5 feet 8 inches and 190 pounds, I was a textbook halfback. Before the injury, tackling me was like trying to stop a bowling ball covered in barbed wire and razor blades rolling down a hill. Afterward, I had the speed of a dump truck with four flat tires.

After graduation, I was faced with a blank canvas. No college prospects, no clear direction. I considered joining the Army, but my knee injury kept me out. So I turned to my friends, who were starting a construction company.

We worked long hours, drank even longer nights, and dreamed of building something big.

But the company folded after a few months, and I was back to square one. I was a general laborer, a janitor, a delivery driver. I was willing to do anything to make ends meet. But it wasn't easy. I was constantly broke, and I felt like I was going nowhere.

So, with my arrogance that I could do anything by myself, having been humbled, community college finally called to me. My motivation was high at first, but boredom with attending countless lectures led me to find an excuse to smoke some weed and go to a movie instead. Making excuses for just about anything became my forte.

One class intrigued me. I took Criminal Justice and Emergency Response, which led to a class on law enforcement. I did fairly well, and the instructor was an excellent mentor. It also helped that the teacher's assistant was smoking hot. I wanted to impress her.

Maybe if I became a cop, it would help my subconscious get a bit of relief from my self-perceived failure to save Brandy. Maybe it would fill that void.

I had a Saint Anthony medal on a chain around my neck. He was a protector of the poor and the finder of lost things. That sounded like a cop to me. So that's what I did.

My name is Mason Gentry. I was an Edge City Police officer for eight years.

Chapter 2

A police department comprises Alpha males and those that aspire to be them. If they sense weakness, they'll eat you alive. The Edge City department was no different. No one gave me any problems. My physique still was like a slightly overweight football player. I got into a couple of scraps in the neighborhood and ended up with a bent nose. My appearance said I could take care of myself.

I had a lot of different partners, but the last one ended my career. After what turned out to be our last call, I ran into his wife. She didn't say a word; she just slapped me across the face with all her might. My head snapped back, and my vision blurred. I felt the sting of her handprint on my cheek, and my ears rang. I wanted to scream at her, to tell her it wasn't my fault, but I knew that nothing I said would make her feel any better. So I just stood there, letting her rage wash over me.

There would be no relief. There would be no resolution that would make all parties whole again. It was a slap borne out of tragedy. It was a last flailing blast of closure. She felt betrayed and had no other way to show it.

The early morning morgue scene occurred because of getting too close, drinking too much wine, and breaking promises made in the moment.

I made the promise to calm the wife's fears and boost the husband's confidence. I now wonder why I made such a promise when life can do you dirty. In that way, I could see why she would think it was all my fault. I should've kept my mouth shut.

The husband in question was fresh out of the police academy. They assigned him to me because we both came from the same part of town. I knew the streets, and I knew the people, and having some things in common made forming a bond easy.

I've chased every kind of perpetrator through apartment buildings and parking lots and at high speed through the streets. I've seen the fear in their eyes as they realized they would not get away and felt the adrenaline rush as I closed in on them.

That night, we were pursuing some dumbass that punched a clerk while stealing beer and cigarettes from a convenience store. Just when you think humanity can't get any lower, somebody will ply the depth.

We were driving when we saw the suspect sprinting out of the storefront. An angry male emerged from the store and spotted us. He was shouting and waving his right arm and pointing at the thief with his left hand.

We followed the fool until he saw us, at which point he climbed the fence and ran onto the junior high school grounds a little after 10 p.m. We sped up and pulled to the curb next to the gate. Exiting our patrol car, we sprinted toward where the perp was last seen.

I was leading and glimpsed him speed-walking around the corner of a building. I made a pivot on my right foot to head toward him, and my knee gave out.

"Oh God, not now!" I growled.

It's the same right knee that gave out on me when I was a halfback in high school. The same pop that gave way to the same feeling of uselessness. I could hear footsteps in the dirt coming up behind me. Placing one hand on my weapon, I twisted to see who it was in the dark.

"You okay, partner?" A voice firmly whispered..

"My goddamned knee quit. I was right behind him. He ducked around a corner up there about 30 yards. He might've stepped into a doorway. Help me up, and we'll call backup."

I looked at him. He had a look in his eyes that told me he didn't hear a word I said.

"Okay. You call for backup. I'll go look to see where he went."

Rookies never listen. They're full of arrogance and adrenaline. It's like a kid with a new toy, and he wants to use it.

"No. I said to help me up."

Before I could finish, he stepped over me. He headed off toward the suspect.

I didn't want to shout at him, so I reached up and engaged my shoulder microphone. I told dispatch we're okay for now, but to please send backup. When I tried climbing to my feet, knee pain shot through my leg enough to make my eyes water.

Off in the distance, I heard sirens. As I was going to radio dispatch to tell them to have the squad cars switch to just lights and no siren, I heard yelling. I couldn't quite make it out.

I hobbled to my feet. I tried to get oriented. The pain in my knee was too much. But when I heard scuffling, it cleared my consciousness. My partner was in trouble. I promised his wife I would take care of him. My overriding senses took over.

I drew my weapon. As I got to the corner of the building, I threw my shoulders against the wall and looked to my right around the corner.

I saw two figures in the shadows. They were grappling with each other. The bigger one's right arm swept down in a stabbing motion. I heard the clatter of a gun hitting the pavement. I hoped that the bigger one would be my partner. I heard a groan. I pointed my weapon in the conflict's direction. It took all the will I could muster not to open fire. I couldn't tell who was who.

I yelled, "Freeze. Don't move."

The bigger one ran off. The bigger one was the perpetrator.

I moved toward my partner on the ground. My breathing was heavy. The pain was shooting. It shot sharply up my leg and into my stomach. It made me nauseous.

As I reached my partner, he was gurgling with each breath. I heard the sounds of other officers approaching.

“Just stay cool. Help is on the way. We’ll get that sonofabitch. He ain’t going home tonight.”

I slid my left hand behind his neck. I try to keep his head supported. He looks at me.

“I’m all right. Just give me a minute. I want to be the one to get him.”

I smiled and exhaled some stress.

“Catch your breath. There’s going to be a bunch of backup in a minute.”

I heard the crack of a shot ring out. I felt the back of my partner’s head snap back—a hot spray splashed across my face. Liquid was cascading down the left side of my neck.

I opened my eyes and looked down. It covered my badge with what looked like red cottage cheese. I looked at my partner. The only way I could describe what I see is that his head looks like a glistening wet canoe.

I sat there in shock. I felt like I was about to scream, but nothing was coming out. My fists squeezed so hard that my right hand squeezed and shot my gun, and the bullet ricocheted across the asphalt and off a building. Behind me, I hear boots and yelling and see flashlight beams moving in all directions.

A crackling voice came from the speaker on my left shoulder. It asked for my location. Before I could answer, I looked up. To my left, I heard snorting and laughing. I pointed my flashlight toward the noise. I saw wild eyes and a white T-shirt covered by a Pendleton. He stared right at me and was running toward me.

I looked at him, and I saw the gun in his left hand pointing at me and bouncing as he ran. My weapon was in my right hand. As I sat up, I secured my bloody right wrist in my left hand while letting my partner drop. I had him locked in and shot once and hit him square in the forehead. I dropped the sonofabitch like Buffalo Bill, stopping his oncoming quarry in its tracks.

His young wife had made me promise I would watch him like a hawk and steer him from trouble. That's what earned me the slap of the century in the morgue. She wouldn't look me in the eye. Judging by her visible baby bump, she will give birth to their first child. It was beyond tragic.

My fellow officers offered the usual mix of sympathy and gallows humor. Some gave me a pat on the back and offered words that gave me an understanding that this was part of the job. Others made fun of how my knee made me a helpless gimp that got one of their own killed. Everybody has the coping mechanisms that get them to the next day. That's understandable to me.

I tried to hold it all stoically, but the recurring nightmare was relentless.

My deceased partner would walk up to me, smiling. He reached out to me. I'd watch his hand pick bits of tissue off the blood-soaked badge on my chest and try to put his brains back into the gaping wound in his skull. He'd tell me everything was alright as a baby cried.

This went on every damn time I tried to sleep. I'd wake up gasping, and my knee throbbed with the reminder of my helplessness.

My knee needed surgery, and it turned into two operations. It would never be right again. They placed me on disability, which caused me to miss weeks and a promotion.

All of this made me spend some idle time on hootch and painkillers. I was dealing with grief and a sense of failure in my way; a way passed down through the generations of men in my family. Being familiar with all the seedy, dim-lit bars in town didn't help either.

My boss kept telling me to return, but I was not in the right headspace. Whenever I thought about rehabilitation, my brain would talk me out of it and return to the comfort of self-pity and the lure of loitering.

One afternoon, the department psychologist called, and I told her to go to hell. She tried again, and I told her the same thing, only more colorfully.

Loneliness, too much reflection, and the slow pace of my recovery made me think police work wasn't in my near future, and soon, the department agreed. I wasn't in any shape to return, and they put me out to pasture with a monthly stipend that was enough for booze and rent for a shitty apartment.

I stared at the wall, feeling sorry for myself. That would not be a sustainable solution. I was not ready to surrender. What I needed to do was find something to keep me motivated.

Being a lousy gambler made playing the horses a bad idea. A card shark was out of the question. My balky knee would never hold up to a day on my feet. I could try learning to code, but I've never been much of a student. I was feeling desperate. That's why being a cop was the best choice, but now that was gone. What to do? Where to go?

Chapter 3

The ocean in the South Pacific shimmered like a new sheet of wet glass. It was clear and warm, like a sandy bottom bathtub. I could feel the cool breeze and the hotness of the sun as it radiated off the white sand of the beach. It was the type of sunshine that could bronze the skin in a few minutes.

I lay on a beach towel. If I opened my eyes, I could see the perfect blue sky. White puffy clouds moved hurriedly as the TradeWinds blew them. Each breath fills my senses with the aromas of clean sea salt, seaweed, tropical fruit, and sandalwood.

I hear shuffling, sandy footsteps behind me. I look up to see a beautiful woman. Her wavy black hair frames her perfectly tanned face. She's wearing red-framed sunglasses. A pink fluorescent sarong around her waist wraps her yellow and tan patterned bikini. She has two cocktails in frosty glasses melting in her hands. I smile. She says...

"Brak, brak, brak, brak!"

I can feel my eyes burn, and I recognize the dull thud in my head. Reaching over and hitting the alarm clock, I take a deep breath. I smell dust and old shoes. Not leather shoes, old gym shoes. I open my eyes and can only force them into a squint.

I engage my abs to sit up, reaching my arms back and bracing myself with my elbows. The dull throb in my head gets louder. A bit of bile sneaks up the back of my throat. I have a cottonmouth. It's not a delightful combination.

I look at the table in my room. I cuss at the half-drunk bottles of rotgut bourbon and empty beer cans. That's when I catch a whiff of cheap cigarette ash.

"Oh, no."

That's a sign that Gail has been here. She's a regular at the crappy dive bar I seem to frequent. I hear a snorting sound. I look to my left, and there she is in all her tattooed glory.

"We need to stop meeting like this."

She opens one eye and looks at me.

"You know you like it. Now, get me a coffee and something to eat as you promised. I don't do this for my health. I deserve some kind of payoff."

The throbbing in my head gets louder. I lean forward, turn, and put my feet on the floor. The room is swirling and dancing like a boat bouncing in a wake.

As I get up, I reach over with my right hand to steady myself. I chew on the dryness of my mouth. A bit of something escapes my belly. A remnant of bourbon vapor escapes through my nose and melts my eyes.

I head for the toilet. Somehow, the room is still moving. I sway front to back with each step. The smell of cigarette smoke wafts into the room.

Before I could say anything, Gail talks about a need for a shower. I can't quite make out what she's saying as the pounding in my skull is distracting her words. I can't concentrate. It's a cacophony of misery.

"Why are you smiling? Do you like to see me miserable?" I ask, squinting at Gail.

"Yeah, kinda. Why are you miserable? I thought we had a great time last night. You were the opposite of miserable when we got here."

I put my head in my hands as reality was battering it like a boxer who knows he has his opponent in trouble.

"What you need is the hair of the dog. After I get out of the shower, let's go get breakfast." Gail said.

I ambled out of the bathroom. As the shower was running, I walked over to the small kitchenette portion of my studio apartment, where I had some old instant coffee packets in a drawer. I turn the hot water on and pour the coffee into a mug that says "Have a great day!" on one side.' and the picture of a raised middle finger on the other. I add a shot of bourbon, grab a spoon, and stir it. I drink the whole thing in two gulps.

Whenever I go to a motel, I always swipe something. The bottles of shampoo and conditioner. The occasional towel or washcloth. But always a bathmat. I can't seem to just use a towel for a bathmat. I've got six or seven of them stacked up underneath the sink in the bathroom. Whenever the one on the floor gets old and grimy, I throw it in the garbage and get another.

I hear the squeaks of the shower being turned off.

“Do you have any clean towels?” Gail asks.

“Oh yeah. I guess I forgot to do laundry.” I said.

Gail lets out a big sigh..

“I have an idea. Why don’t you have a couple of clean towels for guests?”

I look toward Gail out of the corner of my eye.

“I don’t want to encourage them,” I say with a slight smile.

Gail looks at me from around the bathroom door frame.

“You’re right. Why would you want to make your guests feel welcome?”

“I don’t have any guests. You’re the only one who spends time here except me. I don’t consider you a guest.”

“Well, what do you consider me to be?”

Now, this is where it gets tricky. I have to think of something that doesn’t appear to be serious. I also don’t want to upset a sure thing. My relationship with Gail, so far, has been an unspoken mutual agreement.

Now, I have to say something that addresses our arrangement without sounding like a commitment. Oh, screw it.

“I consider you more of a transient.”

A tiny motel bottle of shampoo flies out of the bathroom.

“Well, at least you promised me breakfast. I’m going to hold you to it.”

“Yes, I did. Where would you like to go? I don’t feel like driving anywhere. Jack’s is the only place within walking distance.”

Jack’s Trotters Lounge is a dive. It’s located directly across the street from the horse racing track. It’s been there since the late 1940s.

If you go into a back room, there is an unpainted spot where you can see the different layers of wallpaper. It's like a history exhibit. Black background with bright flowers from the 40s. Red background with gold leaf from the 50s. A way-out colorful one from the '60s. A dark brown and burnt orange from the 70s. Someone has painted the rest of the place battleship gray.

To fill the demand of horse bettors and average everyday miscreants, Trotters opens at 7:30 a.m. You can get a gin and tonic with the beer chaser to go with your bacon and eggs. It attracts hipster wannabes and the old crusty people the hipsters wanna be.

Old men in fedoras filling out the racing form. Women who may, or may not, have been or are prostitutes. Off-duty cops who've been coming here so long that they know it's too much trouble to investigate and then have to do all the paperwork.

"Are you here again, Gent?" Tony, the bartender, asks me.

He's been here as long as anybody could remember.

"I can ask you the same question, Tony."

He smiles. "I keep showing up!"

Years ago, I asked him how long he's worked here. He told me he couldn't remember.

I sat down and ordered steak and eggs, scrambled, and a beer. Gail was speaking with two women at the other end of the bar. I ordered the same for her. There's no need for me to interrupt her conversation. Once focused, she wouldn't hear me.

I looked at my phone when someone's hand touched my left shoulder.

"Is that you, Gent? If it is, you need a haircut."

I turned to look. Police Inspector Tom Barber and I went through the Academy together. We were close once. I know things about him, and he

knows things about me. We know just enough about each other to get the other one in trouble.

Tom looked like he was straight out of Central Casting. Tall, without being too tall, and big, without being too big. His jaw is square, and his nose is straight. That's the exact opposite of me.

"Hello, Tom. You're here early. Looking for someone?"

The right side of Tom's mouth curls upwards.

"Yeah. A washed-up old cop I used to know. What have you been doing? Looking for a damsel in distress? Helping some kid get his lunch money back?"

Tom doesn't think too highly of private detectives. He believes they often do more harm than good. He also believes that criminals often use them to cover up their tracks. When I left the force and became one, Tom was very disappointed. He felt I was throwing away my career and that I would be involved in some shady dealings. He tried to talk me out of it. Now, he just hopes that I don't get in trouble.

"You know me. There's always someone who needs help after the cops give up on them. Buy you a drink?"

"It's a bit too early for me. I got seven hours to the end of my shift. Something tells me you'll still be here. You can buy one for me then."

"If I'm still sitting here this afternoon, we'll both have problems."

As the food arrives, I look to see that Gail's conversation has ended. As she's heading over to me, I tell her, "I ordered the same thing for you I ordered for me. You're going to love it."

I gulp down the beer and order another one. I'm fighting this hangover with everything I've got.

"I had a conversation just now that you're going to be interested in. It'll take your mind off your self-inflicted malady. It started as the usual chit-chat, but

a friend of mine, Darlene, you remember Darlene, right? She was married to that guy that was a biker. They called him Tick-Tock, remember? It was because he had a pacemaker.”

“Yes, I guess. So?”

My eyes rolled back into my head. I rarely pray, so I just threw it out there so that I hope she gets to the point soon.

“Darlene has a friend who works at a casino. A couple of weeks ago, the friend disappeared, and she hasn’t heard from her since. She said that since you’re a detective, maybe you should look into it.”

“Is she going to hire me to look into it? Or does she think I have nothing better to do?”

I doubt some old barfly could pay me enough to make this worth it. Darlene’s friend disappeared? I bet Darlene has had a lot of friends who willingly vanished without a trace.

“What else are you doing?” Gail asked.

She has a point. It annoys me when she’s right.

Since I left the police force, I’ve investigated a lot of things. Rudimentary stuff. Background checks. Surveillance. Finding lost money or things.

Along with my pension, it was enough to pay for my flophouse and booze. Gail seems to think I have money stashed somewhere. I think I’ll let her keep looking.