

Chapter 1

“You Jackabee?”

“I’m Jack B, yeah. Can I help you?” Key still in hand, I turned from the front door of the Alcoholics Anonymous room in Paradise Key. It was my night to put the room back in order and lock up after the meeting. Two men stepped out of the darkness into the glow of the not-so-bright light fixture above the door. I assumed they wanted information about the meetings.

“Your boy owes us money,” the shorter one, wearing dress shoes with no socks said. “And we want it *now!*”

The men closed in. The hair on my arms bristled. “My boy? I don’t have a boy.”

“Yeah, you do,” the second man said. He had one of those twitches that cocked his head involuntarily to the side. “Johnny. He says you’re responsible for him, so his debt is your debt.” Glaring at me, he took two steps closer. I took one step back. He moved quickly, looking impatient. Very impatient.

“Johnny is not my boy.” My eyes narrowed; my teeth clenched. “And I am not responsible for him.”

The guy with the twitch lashed out with his right hand, smacking me on the side of the jaw. I hadn’t been caught so off-guard since I was thirteen, when a tough Irish kid called Sully knocked me off my Stingray bicycle with a single sucker punch. That was twenty years ago. I saw stars then, and I saw stars now.

My instincts screamed *fight* until Shorty lifted the front of his shirt just enough to reveal the butt of a handgun in his waistband. I held my hands up and leaned back. “I’m just his A.A. sponsor.” I tasted blood. “I’ve got nothing to do with this.”

“You owe us money and we want it fast. You got that?” Shorty jabbed his finger in my chest. “We’ll be back in two days.”

“Yeah, maybe your alky friends will chip in.” The guy with the twitch laughed then spit on my Birkenstocks. “Good luck with that.” Both men turned and swaggered away.

“Siri, call Randy Brightman.”

Sheriff Randy Brightman and I are friends and fishing buddies. I was racing toward his house.

“What’s up Jack? Kinda late for you to be calling.”

“I just got attacked by two guys in front of the AA room.”

“They still there?”

I almost ran a stop sign and slammed on the brakes. “No. I’m on my way to your house.”

“What are they driving?”

“I never saw it.”

“What did they look like?”

“I’m in your driveway.”

Brightman rushed out to meet me. I’ve been to his home many times, but never this late and never with blood on my shirt—with a battered face.

“Come in the house, tell me what happened.”

Speaking rapidly through surges of adrenaline, I told Brightman the whole story. His wife, Coco was athletic, not-quite-thirty, and she pranced into the kitchen. Her shiny, nearly-to-the-waist black hair rose with each step, then fell perfectly back in place. Her eyes sprang wide; she gasped.

I looked down. There was more blood than I thought. She grabbed a kitchen towel, wet it, and held it against my face while Brightman talked in police shorthand to his dispatcher.

“Your lip is split pretty good,” she said. “Let’s get some ice on it.”

“Sorry to bust in like this.”

“Cop’s wife, remember?”

“How could I forget?”

She laughed.

Coco and I are good friends that often found ourselves left alone at the Paradise Fish House, or Wings and Fritters, when Brightman was called to an emergency. She always jumped on the opportunity to casually ask, “So. Is there a new woman in your life?”

My invariable answer, “Haven’t found the right one yet.”

Brightman came back to the kitchen. “We’re doing everything we can. But without a description on the vehicle, I doubt we’ll find them.” He pointed at me. “He need stitches?”

“Ice should do it,” Coco replied. “It looks worse than it is.” She took my shirt and gave me another to put on. “You guys do what you gotta do. Keep that iced ‘til the bleeding stops. I’m going to bed.” She kissed me on my room-temperature cheek. I hoped she didn’t think of me as pitiful.

Between interruptions from police radio chatter, we covered every detail of my mugging and Johnny’s involvement with Twitch. Brightman went to the fridge, brought back two tangerine-flavored iced teas, and we eventually settled into casual conversation.

“Hey, remember that white-haired alky from Islamorada you were trying to help?” Brightman asked. “The one who tried to boost one of my patrol cars?”

“I knew it wouldn’t be long before you brought this up again.”

“It was my very first all-electric Sheriff’s unit, and your guy gave up trying to start it ‘cuz he never heard the engine turning over. You still hear from him?”

“No.”

“What about that kid who got drunk, stole his dad’s car, and drove it down the 20th Street boat ramp in the dark? Remember, the witnesses said, ‘As the car floated away, he shifted into reverse and the backup lights came on!’”

“He got a full scholarship to an outboard technician school in Miami and charges a hundred bucks an hour to fix rich people’s boats now.” I was happy to share a success story.

“What about Johnny?” Brightman looked directly into my eyes. “You think you can save him too? And what about all this trouble he just caused you?”

“I don’t know, I haven’t really thought about it yet.”

“Seems to me, he took advantage of you.”

“I just told you, I haven’t thought about it yet.” Brightman was getting on my nerves. “I’m still trying to figure out what to do about the two guys who think I owe them money.”

“Okay, okay. I’m just sayin’. Maybe you should think about dumpin’ Johnny before it’s too late.”

“Maybe I’ll just do that.”

“Yeah, maybe you should.”

“Yeah, maybe I will.”

After a while, with the Johnny argument behind us, no relevant news, and the bleeding stopped, Brightman said, “You might as well go home. I’ll call if I hear anything.”

We backslapped and hugged as I headed for my truck.

I parked under my house; a typical Florida Keys stilt home built on concrete columns to stop storm surge from entering the living areas. The whole property is covered in low maintenance pea rock and landscaped with a few native plants requiring very little, if any, watering. Well organized piles of scaffolding and other remnants of my home remodeling business wait for their next assignment.

I stepped onto the concrete seawall. Motion sensor LED lamps with brass fixtures lit my 25-foot offshore fishing boat sitting on its elevator-style boat lift. On the center of the hull are the sparkly foot-high blue letters EP-2 with Extravagant Promises II spelled out in half size letters just under that. I climbed aboard and sat at the helm. I played my meditation game; it starts by sitting completely still until the lights turn off. I raised my eyes without triggering the motion sensors. The Milky Way came into focus, its nebulous presence beckoning me.

“Father,” I said out loud. “What have I gotten myself into? I’m trying to live a sober and spiritual life. But look what happens when I try to help others. I don’t understand.” The glow of the Milky Way pulled me in. My heart rate dropped; I closed my eyes—emptied my mind...

Eyes still closed, I heard a car moving quietly at the end of my driveway. *Don’t move*, I told myself. Keep the lights off. *Did Twitch and Shorty follow me home?* I kept silent. I didn’t move. I heard pea rock crunch under moving feet from beneath the carport. Not moving a muscle, I called from the dark, “Who’s there?” I prepared to counterattack.

Approaching steps crunched pea rock again. I worried that heavy breathing might trigger the lights. More crunching pea rock. My neck stiffened. I pictured Twitch pouncing in the darkness. This time, I’d be ready.

“I’ve got a gun. Get outta here.” I jumped up, waving my hands, and activated the lights.

“Don’t shoot. Don’t shoot.” A man with one hand up and one covering his eyes begged. “It’s only me. It’s Johnny. Don’t shoot.”

“Johnny? You tryin’ to break into my house now?” I burst off the boat and got in his face.

“Brightman told me what happened. I came to see if you’re all right.”

“What have you done to me?” I moved in, toe-to-toe. He smelled of sweat and stale cigarette breath. “Why do you owe those crooks money?”

“Uh, um, uh...” Johnny looked down and shuffled his feet.

“Don’t um, um me. Come clean. I got punched in the mouth because of you. And why on God’s green earth did you tell them I was responsible for you?”

“Uh, um.”

“Quit that.” I’m sure he knew I was close to smacking him. Every time he backed up, I filled the space.

“All right, all right.” Johnny dropped his hands. “What did they look like?”

“Look like?” Spit flew from my lips. I took a moment to calm down. “There were two of them. The bigger one, the one that hit me, had a nervous twitch.”

“Yeah, yeah, some people actually *call* him Twitch. Not to his face though. He’s one radically crazy man.”

“Get back to why I got bashed in the face.”

“OK, OK,” he said. “I used to buy pot from Twitch. One day, he was givin’ me a hard time and laughing at me. He said I was a loser ‘cause I couldn’t afford to buy his crack. He told me he’d let me have some, and I could pay for it later, with interest. And he warned me, ‘Never miss a payment.’ That’s when it all started. Next thing I know, I owe for my own stuff plus what I bought to sell—”

“Sell? Are you crazy?”

“I know, I know.” Johnny was pleading, almost whining.

“You’re killing me.” I looked deep into bloodshot eyes. “They said you have two days to pay up. How much do you owe them?”

“About ten grand.”

“Ten grand?” I winced. “How did you possibly think you could pay that off?”

Johnny was shuffling his feet, stuttering and stammering. “I got a couple things workin’,” he said. His eyes darted back and forth like a cornered wharf rat.

“Promises from you are no good, Johnny.” My nerves were two synapses away from shattering. I scared him when I drew nearer. “I’m serious.”

“Honest, I got some ideas.” His Adam’s apple danced.

“Ideas don’t make it, Johnny. You need to take care of this right now.” I had to get away from him before I exploded. “Meet me tomorrow before the 10 a.m. meeting.”

Johnny showed up right on time. “I’m gettin’ the money from my dad,” he said as he approached me. “He’s gonna wire it to me.”

We were standing in the parking lot of the AA meeting room where the two men jumped me the night before.

“Do those guys know you’re getting the money?” I was relieved, yet skeptical.

“I’m gonna tell them today. My dad says he’ll send it right away.” His eyes zipped from side to side, like he was looking for somebody. “So, everything is good. But, hey, I gotta go. I’ll call ya tomorrow. This will never happen again. I promise.” He raised his phone to his ear, like he just got a call that didn’t ring and trotted away.

The 10 a.m. meeting was just beginning. I could use one right now. I wasn’t contemplating taking a drink, but I was exhausted and out-of-sorts from dealing with Johnny. An hour in a meeting would redirect and get me centered again.

The sign on the door says Sober in Paradise Room, we all call it the SIP. I walked into the familiar room, which takes up one corner of an industrial storefront. It was formerly a retail shop, specializing in custom-made fishing rods and reels. Inside, Doug D, one of my current sponsees, was straightening the thirty folding chairs that faced a well-worn wooden desk at the front of the room.

Doug D is one of those people who joined AA and hasn’t had a drink since. A gregarious guy, he made friends quickly and was given the nickname DD, which later morphed into Double D. Sober alcoholics are typically an easily amused group, and double-entendre nicknames unfailingly get predictable giggles.

Plaques with inspirational slogans lettered in red and black Old English font adorn the walls. The plaques say: *One Day at a Time*, *You Are Not Alone*, *Live and Let Live*, and *Think, Think, Think*. The last one was hung upside down in a well-meaning attempt at recovery humor. It always makes newcomers laugh.

The room is clean, yet borderline shabby, as expected from an organization kept afloat with donations collected by “passing the hat”, a straw basket in this case.

There were ten of us in the meeting. We spent the hour sharing highlights and low points of the previous weeks or days. We talked about how we used to handle our situations, problems, and accomplishments when we were drinking and how we manage them now in sobriety.

Frequently we broke out in laughter. A newcomer asked, “How can you laugh at all your mistakes and problems?”

“We’re not laughing at our problems,” a member of several years answered. “We’re laughing at our solutions.”

As the meeting came to an end, the chairperson, Dennis P, a curmudgeonly AA old-timer, and my sponsor, started the basket on its serpentine journey through the room.

Everyone in the room knew the drill; we stood and formed a circle. We held hands and Dennis said, “We will close with the Lord’s Prayer.”

Outside, Juan—another of my sponsees—and Dennis were waiting for me.

“Hey,” I said. “Double D’s new boat is down at the Fish House. You wanna check it out and grab some lunch?”

We piled into Dennis’s sun-faded Suburban and drove to the Paradise Fish House, originally an ancient icehouse built more than 50 years ago. It sits at the end of a narrow dead-end road directly on the Gulf of Mexico, or as the locals call it, Florida Bay. Dennis parked halfway between the 35-slip marina and the muraled restaurant.

We met Double D and spent an hour “kicking the tires” on his newly acquired vessel, an older trawler-style boat, 45-feet long with a single diesel engine, round brass portholes and a cavernous main salon with sliding teak doors. A galvanized plow-shaped anchor hung from the bow pulpit.

After the boat inspection, we took a table on the sturdy concrete seawall that keeps the restaurant from slipping into the Gulf of Mexico. Our orders were taken at a walkup window by a teenaged shaved-headed girl with ten visible piercings and chrome fingernails. She asked for the names of our favorite movies, which would be called out when our orders were ready.

“Silence of the Lambs, your order is ready,” came over the PA system as we were returning to our table. We toasted the new boat by clinking biodegradable glasses of flavored iced tea.

I recounted the events of the past several days and nights to my friends. They offered to help with no reservations. I confessed that I feared what might happen next. “Shorty had a gun; Twitch probably did too,” I told them. “In my drinking days I would have fought back. I feel like a coward.”

“In your drinking days, you might have been killed, too,” Dennis, always the avuncular voice of reason, said.

“Still, it’s bothering me,” I said. “If I see them again I’m not sure what I would do.”

“Terminator Two, Alien, Godfather, Weekend at Bernie’s, your orders are ready.”

Double D jumped up. “Our food is ready.”

Driving home, my mind wandered. Why don’t I ever learn? Why do I fall for these stories? All I want is to stay sober and help other alcoholics.

I’d been snookered before by AA newcomers. In fact, soon after joining AA, I started a one-man handyman business. I printed flyers on bright-yellow paper and left them on doors in the surrounding neighborhoods.

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In a well-meaning attempt to give back, I hired only AA newcomers to help with the overwhelming demand for my services. Before the jobs were even completed, many of my new “helpers” would ask for an advance, then never be seen again.

I finally gave up on hiring newcomers when a young woman with painting experience, fresh off her second DUI, spilled a lovely sanguine-colored paint the manufacturer called *Drama Queen*, on a regular customer’s porch. “She was doing great in the morning,” the customer told me. “But after she came back from lunch, she seemed really drowsy. And then, poor little thing, she stepped off the ladder right into her bucket of paint.”

I apologized, cleaned up the mess, and made sure the customer was satisfied with my work.

The business grew and prospered over the years. I studied for—and earned—several specialty contractor licenses for plumbing, electrical and window/door replacements. I also changed the name of the business to *Easy Does It Remodeling*. I’ve maintained a low overhead by working from my house and having no fulltime employees. I still hire AA members, but not until they’ve been sober for at least a year.