

THE
PENITENTIARY

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1

P “Did it occur to you that you’re stealing food from the mouths of the shopkeeper’s children?” The judge asked, her stern gaze making the young man’s head hang even lower over his slender shoulders.

Did it occur to you that I haven’t eaten in two days? Elijah thought, refusing to meet the judge’s eyes. It wouldn’t help if she saw the disrespect in his eyes. Yes, he resented her authority, but he wasn’t foolish enough to disregard its power over him.

I had to take what they refused to give me, he thought to himself.

The judge looked around the room for a face creased with worry for the boy who stood before her, his hands bound in front of him, the prison clothes hanging on his small frame.

No one looked at him, not even his court-appointed attorney. His plight moved her.

“How old are you?” she asked with a weary sigh.

Elijah mumbled a response she couldn’t hear.

His attorney looked over in annoyance at the boy. “It says here he’s thirteen.” The man replied, reading from the file in front of him.

“Does he have a home?” The judge asked.

“There’s an address on his intake form,” the distracted attorney replied.

Only Elijah knew the address belonged to an abandoned plot of land in a remote part of town no one ever ventured to, with a dilapidated two-room hovel that swayed dangerously when the wind blew.

“Young man,” the judge ordered. “Young man, look at me.”

Elijah reluctantly turned to the judge, his face guarded.

“I’m going to sentence you to six months of community service at the penitentiary.”

The shopkeeper’s loud exclamation of outrage drew the judge’s attention to him. His

red, mottled face displayed his anger at the lenient sentence.

“Christian charity should have compelled you to feed the boy. If you had, we wouldn’t be here today,” the judge snapped at the man. “Unlike you, he looks like he hasn’t had a decent meal in a while.” Her eyebrows quirked as she gazed pointedly at the shopkeeper’s portly physique.

The shopkeeper huffed out of the courtroom.

The judge nodded to the bailiff. “Call the next case.”

Surprised, Elijah looked around the room as the policeman removed his handcuffs. The court-appointed attorney was already moving on to his next case.

“What am I supposed to do now?” Elijah asked the policeman as the man handed him a paper bag stuffed with his belongings.

“Go to the bailiff and get your paperwork,” the policeman replied. “Then report to the petitionary at two o’clock today.”

“That’s it?” Elijah asked.

“That’s it,” the policeman replied.

Elijah hightailed it out of the courtroom, stopping only long enough to wash the jail cell dust from his face and change into his ragged clothes in the public bathroom.

2

P The stark grey building could have been any penitentiary in any country, anywhere in the world. It was designed to beat the strongest of men into submission, fearsome animals with lifeless expressions reduced to frightened children.

To a child who had only known hunger and poverty, burdened by deprivation that erased all traces of hope, its intimidating concrete walls didn't scare Elijah.

Silently, the boy handed the court paperwork to a burly guard chewing noisily on a sandwich that Elijah looked at with envy.

The guard waved him through and told him to find the assistant warden for his assignment. Distracted by the meaty sandwich, Elijah could only stare at the man's mouth.

“Go through the door and look for the door that says ‘Assistant Warden: Drake Raburn’ on it,” the man instructed, waving Elijah away.

So, Elijah walked along the cylindrical hallway until he found the door he was looking for, and then he knocked. A voice from within told him to come in.

Drake Raburn was writing furiously, his pen skimming along the paper and skidding off the side only to be drawn abruptly back to start the skating process again. He looked up briefly to see Elijah standing in front of him.

“Yes?” Raburn asked, his voice not masking his impatience.

“The judge told me to come here,” Elijah replied.

“Why?” Raburn asked.

“I was sentenced to six months’ probation,” Elijah responded, hesitating.

“For what?” Raburn inquired, surprised.

“Stealing,” Elijah whispered.

“Jesus!” Raburn exclaimed, giving the boy a once-over. “They get younger and younger every year.”

“Sir?” Elijah asked, not understanding the offhanded comment.

“Nothing,” Raburn muttered, looking down at the paper before him.

“What do you want me to do?” Elijah enquired.

“Menial tasks,” Raburn uttered, again distracted by his report.

When there was no movement from the boy, Raburn looked up at him. “Mopping, scrubbing, cleaning.”

Elijah nodded but didn’t move.

Raburn was losing his patience. “Go find something to clean. Go!”

Elijah nodded, dropped his paperwork on Raburn’s desk, and backed out of the office. Before he closed the door behind him, he heard Raburn yell one more instruction.

“Don’t speak to any of the prisoners!”

He had no idea where to find a mop and bucket, so he started walking. The penitentiary was designed to be stark and utilitarian, with its primary focus on security and control. Heavy doors blocked his entrance along the corridor. Through one door, he could see rows

of individual cells with reinforced doors, all of which were closed. In one corner, where the two arms of the building met, he found a large room with few tables, chairs, and exercise equipment. However, as he peered through the reinforced metal door, no one seemed to notice him, so he was unable to gain entrance.

He continued down a long, narrow hallway until he found a staircase that seemed to lead into the bowels of the building. At the end was the only open door he'd seen; a mop and bucket on wheels waited forlornly as he pushed through the heavy door. Pushing the bucket with the mop, he came to an open cell and peered inside. It was empty, except for cleaning supplies dumped haphazardly on the floor at the back of the room.

The room was a nine-by-three-foot concrete and cinder block cell. In one corner, a concrete bed was inlaid along the wall, and at the back was a concrete toilet with a small sink next to it.

Elijah hoisted the bucket to the sink and started filling it with water. The sink was too small to hold the bucket, so he looked around

for something to use to fill it. It was then that he noticed the heavy metal door. It had to block all light from entering the drab cell when closed. A small opening, just big enough for a dinner tray, was propped open with a plastic cup. He retrieved the cup, placed it on the sink, and then started scrubbing the toilet and sink. He was mopping his way out of the cell when Raburn found him.

“How did you get down here?” Raburn asked.

“Through the only open door I could find,” Elijah replied. “And I found a mop and bucket.”

“Damn that lazy bastard, Stuey,” Raburn cursed to himself. Looking at Elijah, he added. “You shouldn’t be down here; it’s a restricted area.”

“I’m nearly done,” Elijah replied.

That’s when the moaning started, quickly leading to desperate screams of fear that came from the end of the hallway.

“Shut the fuck up, you crazy bastard!” came a sharp, staccato, rapid string of angry words.

“Jesus Christ, not again!” came another explosion of sound.

“Just let me out for ten seconds, and I’ll end your miserable whining!” another bellow echoed off the walls.

Elijah looked around as the wrathful voices seemed to bounce off the concrete walls around him.

“Max, Max, you need to relax,” came a calm but insistent voice from the cell across from where Elijah and Raburn stood.

“Doc! Doc, is that you?” a voice came from the end of the hallway.

“Yeah, buddy. It’s Doc,” the voice said closer to the cell door. Elijah looked toward it as Raburn stared into the empty cell.

Elijah glanced at Raburn. If he couldn’t talk to the prisoners, then it stood to reason they weren’t allowed to speak to each other, yet Raburn seemed to ignore the exchange.

“Max, let’s you and I take a walk together,” the dismembered voice urged gently.

“Where we going Doc?” the voice at the end of the hall howled. “It’s awful dark in here.” Max’s voice, filled with desperation, was

on the brink of turning into the terror that Doc was trying to steer him away from.

"Then let's go for a walk," Doc cajoled, his voice light and encouraging. "We're in a forest, buddy; it can be dark, but there's light peeking through the trees around you. Do you see it, Max? Do you see the light?"

"I think I see it, Doc!" Max answered, his voice trembling as he regained his composure.

"Great. We'll walk toward it, buddy, just you and me." Doc's voice took on a soothing, dreamlike quality that enveloped the dark hallway in a blanket of peace and tranquility. "The bed of leaves below our bare feet feels like a thick, lush carpet. It feels so good, doesn't it, Max?"

Not waiting for a response, the voice continued. "It leads us to a babbling brook, where cool, clear water flows beside a towering tree that stretches toward the sky. Its trunk is so thick and strong that we can lean against it while sitting on a soft carpet of leaves, the water gently lapping at our feet. Can you feel it, Max? The comfort of the tree, the softness of the grass, and the coolness of the water on

our toes?”

“I feel it, Doc,” Max’s voice drifted down the hallway.

“And the sunlight filters through the leaves, just enough to warm us. Can you feel the sun on your skin, Max?”

Elijah glanced at Raburn, leaning casually against the metal door and staring intently into the empty cell.

“Now, we’re going to rest, Max,” the voice continued. “With the sun warming our skin, the sturdy tree at our backs, and the gentle water caressing our feet, it’s time to drift off to sleep now.”

Elijah listened to Doc’s voice, as transfixed as everyone else on the cellblock. The mop in his hands felt heavy and would have fallen from his grasp if Raburn hadn’t taken it from him.

“I think you’re done here,” Raburn said as he dumped the cleaning supplies into the empty bucket. “Grab the bucket and follow me.”

Elijah could only nod and do as he was told. He followed Raburn back up the steps,

stopping only to stow the mop, bucket, and cleaning supplies in a small closet at the top of the stairs.

Raburn returned to his office, Elijah following behind him meekly. Picking up the phone, Raburn barked into the receiver, "Find Stuey and tell him to meet me in the canteen!"

Pausing, Raburn studied Elijah with a sweeping glance. "Have you eaten?"

Elijah gave Raburn a blank look.

"You're allowed one meal at the canteen with every six-hour shift," Raburn explained. "Have you eaten today?"

Elijah could only shake his head, so Raburn walked out of the office, motioning for Elijah to follow him.

Raburn was annoyed. Annoyed at the door, annoyed at Stuey for leaving it open, annoyed at Elijah for finding not one but two open doors, and annoyed at the consequences he now had to deal with. In the canteen, he handed Elijah a tray, filling it as quickly as he filled his own with food.

Elijah watched Raburn's flying hands with astonishment, then with appreciation. He

followed Raburn, sitting across from him as Raburn watched the boy dig into the food on his tray. He saw Stuey making a beeline for him out of the corner of his eye, and Raburn's face hardened.

"What the fuck, Stuey?" Raburn snapped.

"What now?" Stuey grumbled. "I don't do nothing wrong."

"Really?" Raburn barked. "You didn't leave the door to the solitary block open while you pissed off for a cigarette?"

"Come on, Raburn!" Stuey squawked. "No, never."

"You're right about never," Raburn growled. "You're fired! I warned you what would happen if you ever left the fucking door open again."

"Boss!" Stuey pleaded.

Raburn nodded at the guard, who had silently moved to stand behind Stuey

"Time to go, Stuey," the guard said, grabbing his arm.

"Boss! Please! Raburn, please!" Stuey's plaintive pleas followed him out of the canteen.

Only then did Raburn pick up his fork and start eating, as Elijah pocketed a piece of bread and a chicken leg for later.

"You don't need to do that," Raburn said, not looking up from his food.

"What?" Elijah asked, his mouth full of pasta.

"Steal food," Raburn replied, looking at Elijah and pointing to his pocket with the fork. "If you need to take food home, just ask the cook. I'll tell him it's okay."

Elijah pulled the bread and chicken leg from his pocket and ate them.

"What's your name?" Raburn asked, turning back to his plate.

"What's your name?" Elijah asked defensively.

"Drake Raburn," Raburn retorted. "But everyone calls me Raburn."

"Elijah Steel," Elijah replied.

"Ironical," Raburn replied. But that was the name on the paperwork the boy dropped on his desk, so he knew Elijah wasn't lying.

"Who was that man in the cell?" Elijah asked.

“What man?” Raburn deferred.

“The man Max called Doc,” Elijah pushed.

“You good with names?” Raburn asked.

“I have an eidetic memory,” Elijah replied.

“A what?” Raburn asked.

“I remember everything I see or hear,”
Elijah explained.

“Are you a genius or something?” Raburn
deflected again.

Elijah just shrugged. “You going to answer
my question?”

“I told you not to speak to the prisoners,”
Raburn reminded him.

“I didn’t speak to anyone, but I couldn’t
help hearing what they said; I was right there,
and so were you,” Elijah countered.

“You did a good job cleaning that cell,”
Raburn offered.

“Thanks,” Elijah responded.

“Could I trust you to keep that block clean?”
Raburn asked.

“I won’t leave the fucking door open if
that’s what you’re asking,” Elijah rejoined.

Raburn laughed and nodded.

Elijah paused before asking the question

he really wanted Raburn to answer. "What happened to the man in the cell I cleaned out?"

"Doc didn't get to him in time," Raburn replied, his voice so low Elijah had to sit forward to hear him.

3

P Prisons are run on a routine, mastered by the clock for maximum efficiency and strict control of their inhabitants. At precisely two o'clock, Elijah walked through the imposing gates and under the sign announcing he was entering the penitentiary run by Warden Raburn.

There were twelve solitary cells on Elijah's block. Each prisoner was allotted twenty minutes in the 'yard', a fenced-in pen where they could walk around while getting fresh air. However, removing each prisoner from their cell and returning them took ten minutes.

With his back to the door, the inmate stuck his hands through the metal opening to be handcuffed. Then, the door was opened by two guards, one wielding a cattle stick with enough electric shock to immobilize a grown

man.

Elijah spent twenty minutes cleaning each cell before the guards returned with the inmates. For the first week, he seemed to be the topic of conversation after the guards left to prepare the dinner trays.

"Looks like Stuey's gone," one man announced as he returned to his cell. He earned himself five seconds with the cattle stick for that statement.

"I could have told you that," another inmate announced. "The stink of cigarette smoke is gone. God, I miss cigarettes!"

"My cell has never been cleaner," joked another one.

"Ohhh," the first prisoner moaned in pain. "Doc, they got me good with the shit shooter."

"What's it looking like?" Doc asked.

"A loud, angry woman at the moment," the prisoner commented, and everyone laughed.

"You need some aloe, or it's going to blister and fester when they pop open," Doc pronounced.

"Wishful thinking," declared another.

On his way home that night, Elijah came

across a patch of aloe on the side of the road. He broke off two leaves, peeled and cleaned the yellow slime from them, and secured them in an outgrown shirt. The wet T-shirt kept them moist until he could slip it to the prisoner when he removed the nightly dinner trays.

“Thanks, Doc,” the prisoner exclaimed.

“For what?” Doc asked.

“The aloe,” came the surprised response.

Cleaning eleven cells took five and a half hours each day. When Elijah was done, he went to the canteen to have dinner with Raburn, which became their routine after his first day there.

“I have a question,” Elijah said as he finished eating.

“Okay?” Raburn replied.

“Why don’t I ever clean Doc’s cell?”

“Doc doesn’t leave his cell,” Raburn muttered.

“Why not?”

Raburn threw his fork down. “Warden’s orders.”

“Aren’t you the warden?” Elijah asked.

"I'm the assistant warden."

"But the warden's name is Raburn," Elijah pushed.

"Mason Raburn," Raburn ground out through gritted teeth. "My father."

Elijah's eyes widened. "Your father's the warden?"

Raburn nodded.

"Why doesn't he let Doc out of his cell?"

"Isn't it time for you to collect the dinner trays?" Raburn asked.

Elijah was immediately distracted. The last half-hour of his shift was his favorite. While he collected the dinner trays, Doc took everyone on a journey to a far-off place, and he didn't want to miss it.

He grabbed the paper bag the cook had filled with food, stuffed a dinner roll in his mouth, and ran out of the canteen, arriving just in time.

"Where we going tonight, Doc?"

"Tonight is an adventure, boys," Doc announced. "We're headed to the Australian outback."

Elijah quickly collected the dinner trays,

then settled himself against the wall by Doc's cell to listen.

"Deep in the heart of the Australian outback, the sun blazes overhead, casting a golden hue over the endless stretch of red earth and sparse vegetation. A group of friends embarks on an adventure, their vehicle kicking up dust as they traverse the rugged terrain," Doc's voice began.

"As they drive deeper into the wild, the landscape shifts from flat plains to towering hills and rugged cliffs. The air is filled with the sounds of nature: the distant call of a kookaburra and the rustle of leaves stirred by a gentle breeze. They stop at a waterhole, its cool, crystal-clear waters gleaming with an incandescent shimmer. After a refreshing swim, they relax on the sandy bank, while keeping an eye out for curious kangaroos."

On the cell block, no one moved, transfixed by the images Doc painted so vividly.

"In the afternoon, they explore a nearby cave system known for its ancient Aboriginal rock art. Armed with torches, they venture

inside, marveling at the intricate paintings that tell stories of a time long ago. The cave is cool and dark, a stark contrast to the harsh sunlight. They feel a sense of reverence as they stand in a space where time seems to stand still.

When the sun sets, the men climb a nearby ridge to witness the spectacular sunset in the outback. The sky transforms into a canvas of vibrant oranges, purples, and pinks, casting a warm glow over the land. They sit in silence, appreciating the beauty and tranquility of the moment.

Once night falls, they camp under a blanket of stars, the Milky Way stretching like a river of light across the sky. They gather around a campfire, sharing stories and laughter, the crackling flames providing warmth against the cool night air. The outback hums with life, the sounds of nocturnal animals creating a symphony that lulls them into a peaceful sleep. They feel a deep connection to the land and a sense of adventure that will stay with them long after they leave the outback behind.”

Light flickered across the ceiling, and

Elijah's imagination conjured Doc's stories like a film unfolding on a big screen. The vivid images lingered until Doc fell silent, leaving only the stillness of the men in their cells.

Until the sound of a loud fart ripped through the hallway.

"Jesus Christ!" exclaimed a prisoner.

"For fuck's sake, it's stinking up my cell!" cried another. "What crawled up your ass and died?"

"Sorry, fellas," the offender called out. "It's the bare shite food they feed us."

"Doc?" another prisoner growled.

"He needs mint leaves to chew on," Doc answered. "That will settle his stomach."

"Wishful thinking," the offender replied, with just a tinge of hope.

Elijah had no idea what mint leaves were and was torn between following Raburn's order not to speak to the prisoners and his desire to help the flagellant offender. After another evening of Doc's storytelling interrupted by the smelly odors, Elijah decided to break Raburn's rule to avoid a riot.

“Doc!” Elijah whispered, his lips as close to the metal door opening as he could get.

“What are mint leaves?”

“Mint is a sprawling plant with square stems. The leaves feel smooth, like velvet. When you chew them, they have a strong, refreshing taste,” came the soft reply.

“Thanks,” Elijah mumbled.

“Thank you, Elijah,” Doc replied.

Elijah looked at the door in surprise. *How does he know my name?*

A chuckle from behind the door made him pause. “What you do around here means a lot to us.”

As Elijah walked home, he repeated what Doc had told him like a mantra as he searched for the elusive plant. “Sprawling plant, square stem, smooth leaf, refreshing taste.”

“What you looking for so intensely?” Raburn asked as he slowed his car to keep pace with Elijah. “You didn’t hear my car?”

Elijah shook his head as he silently mouthed his mantra.

“You’ll get run over if you don’t pay

attention,” Raburn warned.

“I’m looking for a mint plant,” Elijah admitted, his voice echoing his frustration.

“What for?” Raburn asked.

Elijah searched Raburn’s face, trying to decide if he should tell the truth.

“One of the men on the cellblock is going to start a riot soon if he doesn’t stop farting up the place,” Elijah admitted.

“One of the men?” Raburn asked, noting Elijah’s choice of words.

Elijah nodded, then returned to scouring the ground for the plant.

“Get in,” Raburn ordered.

The surprised boy turned to stare at him.

“I know where you can find some mint, so get in the car before I change my mind,” Raburn barked.

Elijah quickly complied, scrambling to the passenger side and climbing in beside Raburn, who took off with a scowl.

They drove in silence until Raburn veered onto a dirt lane, making his way toward a solitary house visible in the distance. The old clapboard house had seen better days; its

once-bright paint was now a faded memory, peeling and chipping under the weight of time. Raburn parked his car beside the porch, with its creaky steps and rusty nails. As Elijah followed Raburn to the back of the house, he realized the place was steeped in a dark history, echoing whispers of the past in every creak and groan.

Behind the house, a carefully tended herb garden sprawled out, with each herb arranged in tidy rows and clearly labeled at the start of each row.

“I wouldn’t have taken you for a gardener,” Elijah commented.

“It belonged to my mother,” Raburn explained. “I used to help her with it, and when she died, well, I guess it was a way for me to keep her close.”

Elijah was surprised by Raburn’s wistful expression. He didn’t take Raburn for the sentimental type.

Raburn pointed to the mint. “Take what you need, then meet me in the house, and I’ll show you how to preserve it.”

When he had collected a handful of

leaves, Elijah followed Raburn's path up the back steps into the kitchen just as Raburn took a mason jar and plastic bag from a cupboard. Carefully, he took the leaves from Elijah and walked over to the sink.

"Trim the stems, then rinse the leaves and pat them dry like this," Raburn demonstrated as he spoke. "Place the leaves in water like this. Cover it with a plastic bag, and keep it in the refrigerator until you're ready to take it to the prison."

Seeing the concerned look on Elijah's face, he hesitated. "What?"

"Where I live, well, I don't have a fridge," Elijah explained, chewing on his bottom lip.

Raburn's eyes narrowed. "Where exactly do you live?"

Elijah avoided Raburn's eyes. "I'm between homes at the moment."

"Where do you sleep?" Raburn asked.

"Where I can," Elijah mumbled.

"Do you go to school?" Raburn quizzed.

Elijah hung his head. "No, but I go to the library and read a lot."

Raburn cursed under his breath.

"I'm not stupid," Elijah muttered defensively.

"That I know," Raburn retorted. Seeing the boy flinch at his tone, he softened.

"You're a good kid."

Elijah nodded. "It was just me and Ma, and she did her best. She sent me to school when she could, but she was sick a lot, and then she died two years ago."

"You've been on your own for two years?" Raburn asked.

"No one came looking for me if that's what you're asking," Elijah snapped.

Raburn looked away first. "My mother died when I was ten," Raburn offered.

"But you had your dad?" Elijah asked.

Raburn nodded.

"I didn't know my father," Elijah mumbled.

The room was suddenly uncomfortably quiet.

"Hey, you want to stay for dinner?" Raburn asked.

Elijah brightened. "Cook gave me dinner. I'll share it with you," Elijah offered.

Raburn looked at the boy in surprise.

“He always gives me more than I can eat,” Elijah clarified. “Consider it a thank you for the mint leaves.”

As Elijah ran through the house to get the food bag from the car, Raburn walked to the window to watch him. Raburn knew from experience that Elijah needed to save the leftover dinner for breakfast, yet the boy still offered to share it with him. The simple, selfless gesture moved Raburn in a way he hadn’t expected, stirring something deep inside him, familiar but buried long ago.

As they ate, Elijah asked Raburn questions about the herbs in the garden.

“Chamomile is an annual,” Raburn started.

“What does that mean?”

“It dies when it gets cold, so you must replant seeds in the spring.”

“How do you preserve it?”

“You dry the flowers and store them in a small bag that allows them to breathe so you can steep them in boiling water to make tea.”

“What’s it good for?”

“It helps you to sleep if you’re agitated or upset; after it cools, you can use the leaves to soothe red, puffy eyes.”

After dinner, Raburn took Elijah outside and showed him how to tend the garden, explaining each plant as Elijah asked about it.

“Lavender helps you sleep better when you place the dried leaves under your pillow. The lemon balm soothes an upset stomach. Basil is an antiseptic, so it’s good for bug bites when the leaves are crushed. Calendula, you steep the petals in hot water, and then when it cools, you can use it as a mouthwash for bleeding gums.”

They worked in the garden until it got dark.

“Look,” Raburn said as Elijah gathered his things to leave. “I have a spare bedroom. You’re welcome to sleep here tonight if you’d like. We’ll talk about you going back to school tomorrow.”

“I can’t go to school,” Elijah said, alarmed. “If they know I don’t have a mother or a home, they’ll call family services, and I don’t want to go into a home. I’d rather take my

chances on my own.”

“Okay, don’t freak out,” Raburn wheedled. “We’ll come up with something. Agreed?”

Elijah nodded. He was happy to have a roof over his head and a warm bed, even if it was just for one night.

The Penitentiary resembled a small city, sprawling across the equivalent of seven football stadiums. Designed to house high-risk criminals, it offered various perks to the guards responsible for monitoring these dangerous inmates, including a school that Raburn oversaw.

By the end of the month, Elijah was enrolled in school, happily ensconced in Raburn’s house, and learning about medicinal herbs from Doc.

When one inmate on the block complained about a pimply scalp caused by oily hair, Doc and Elijah developed a rinse using dried rosemary leaves and lemon juice. When another developed a dry cough, again disrupting the fragile peace on the block, Doc instructed Elijah to pour boiling water over

fresh thyme leaves and steep a tea for the man to drink.

But their biggest challenge arose when an inmate complained that his vision was failing. As the man walked back to his cell from his time in the yard, Elijah pretended to be running late and mopped his way out of the man's cell as he waited patiently, his eyes as wide as he could make them, for Elijah's report to Doc.

"They're almost completely clouded over," Elijah told Doc.

"Probably cataracts," Doc replied solemnly.

"What's the treatment?" Elijah asked.

Doc took his time before responding. "Not much we can do. He's going to lose his eyesight."

Elijah was frustrated. Even his untrained eye could see that the man's sight was too far gone to correct. "There must be something, even if it prolongs his sight for a little longer."

"Carrots sprinkled with turmeric for him to eat. That's all I can think of," Doc murmured.

Raburn returned home that night to find Elijah replanting carrot stalks from the prison garden the cook had given him.

“Why are you planting carrots in an herb garden?” Raburn asked, slightly annoyed.

“We need carrots,” Elijah offered, not looking up. “Oh, when you go to the grocery store, please pick up some turmeric?”

“Turmeric?” Raburn asked, astonished at the unusual request.

“Yes,” Elijah replied, turning away from planting to look at Raburn. “Please.”

Elijah thrived under Raburn’s care and Doc’s tutelage, and a year passed quickly. However, one person was not pleased with Raburn's contentment with domestic life and Elijah's sense of comfort and security.

Stuey had pleaded his case directly to Warden Mason Raburn, claiming Drake was out to get him. He would happily join the network of spies Warden Raburn utilized throughout the prison in exchange for his job back. Stuey set his sights on Elijah, following him and watching his every move whenever he could, just waiting for the young man to

make a mistake he could capitalize on. He was waiting at the bottom of the steps when Elijah arrived with a handful of notebooks and pens.

“Where you going with all that?” Stuey asked, his voice dripping with suspicion. “You know prisoners can’t have paper and pen in their cells.”

“It’s not for them,” Elijah stammered. “It’s for me to do my homework.”

Stuey eyed Elijah but said nothing, which made Elijah think he had gotten away with his lie.

Two days later, when Elijah was in school, the Warden, Stuey, and several guards, including Raburn, raided the block and found the notebooks and pens in Doc’s cell. Doc was dragged away and given the beating of his life. When Elijah arrived to clean the cells, the inmates were in an uproar as Raburn walked casually back to Doc’s cells, wiping the blood from his hands on a rag.

Elijah got his first look at Doc and was horrified by what he saw. Hanging between two prison guards, Doc was held upright by

his armpits, with his legs dragging behind him as his head lolled from side to side, his eyes closed. His thin, wiry body was covered in blood, and his thin, long hair clung matted to his head and shoulders. The guards threw him in his cell, where he slumped against the wall, the last thing Elijah saw before they closed the door.

The inmates went wild, throwing food and trays through the slot in the door into the hallways. Thin mattresses were pulled apart and tossed into the long hallway.

The Warden turned to Raburn. "Don't replace the mattresses. The bastards can sleep on concrete. And no food and water until they settle down."

"What about the person what gave Doc pen and paper," Stuey griped, looking at Elijah.

"I'll deal with that," Raburn said, giving Stuey a look that sent him running from the hallway.

"Make sure you do," the Warden commanded.

Raburn wiped his hand again and turned

to Elijah. "Clean this mess up." Then he followed the guards up the steps, closing the door behind him.

"Elijah, is Doc alive?" one inmate called out.

Elijah was too shocked to answer.

"Boy, did you see Doc?" another demanded.

He stumbled down the hallway as hands grabbed at him through slotted doors, terrifying him even more.

"This is not helping, Doc," Elijah announced, his voice shaking. "Don't cause any more trouble. Settle down, and let me clean up this mess. That's all we can do for Doc now."

One by one, the men settled down as Elijah cleaned the hallway.

"Do you remember when Doc told us about riding a camel in the Sahara Desert?" Elijah asked.

The men quieted.

"It's like stepping into a different world. Doc said. The camel's gentle sway becomes a rhythm guiding you across a vast expanse of

golden sand stretching endlessly. The air is warm and dry, and the sun casts long shadows that make the dunes seem like they are moving with you. It's a tranquil journey, with the camels softly padding along and the occasional rustling of the wind to break the silence.

As night falls, the desert transforms into a starry canvas. Countless stars shine brightly in the clear sky. The vast expanse of the cosmos makes you feel small yet connected to the world while reminding you it's one of the most beautiful places on earth."

By the time Elijah finished recounting the story, all the debris had been packed into garbage bags, which he dragged up the stairs to the dumpster. When he arrived home, he found Raburn stone-faced and drinking whiskey straight from a bottle.

"I gave Doc the notebooks and pens," Elijah confessed. "I wanted him to write down all he knew about herbal medicines. It's not his fault, it's mine."

Raburn nodded but said nothing; he just put the bottle to his mouth and drank.

“If you want me to leave, I understand,”
Elijah whispered.

Raburn took a deep breath. “I don’t.”

Elijah looked stunned but said nothing.

“Go to bed, Elijah.”

Elijah did as he was told, and Raburn drank until he could no longer hear Elijah’s soft crying.

The following morning, Raburn handed him some notebooks and pens.

“If Doc lives,” Raburn’s tone was harsh. “You write down what he tells you about herbs and medicine.”

Elijah took the materials from Raburn and nodded gravely.

“Get ready, or you’ll be late for school,” Raburn ordered.

It took two nerve-wracking days for Doc to wake up. During that time, Elijah did what he could to maintain peace on the block, reminding the inmates that any infraction would harm Doc.

Elijah managed to sneak water, broth, bandages, and salves into the prison for Doc.

“I’m sorry I gave you the books, Doc,”

Elijah muttered, his voice tinged with regret.

"I'm sorry Raburn beat you so badly."

"It's not your fault," Doc assured him.

"And Raburn didn't break anything."

"Are you sure?" Elijah asked. "It looked pretty bad to me."

"Oh, it's bad," Doc laughed, then lapsed into a coughing fit. "But not deadly."

Elijah didn't say anything. He was torn between Raburn and Doc, and it was eating away at him.

"That Calendula salve is really good. How did you prepare it?" Doc asked.

"I crushed the flowers, steeped them, then mixed them with beeswax," Elijah answered.

"That's clever," Doc replied.

Elijah said nothing but didn't move from Doc's door.

"This is not on you, Elijah," Doc began.

"It's not even on Raburn."

"How can you say that?" Elijah interrupted.

"He was following orders," Doc said.

"Why does the Warden hate you so much?" Elijah asked.

"I've been in prison more years than I can remember," Doc explained. "It took me a long time to stop seeing the world as a hunting ground full of predators, and that only happened when I started telling myself stories, the ones my mother used to tell me, and suddenly, I was no longer confined to a concrete, windowless box; no longer a hunted man but free to go wherever my imagination took me."

"I don't understand," Elijah said.

"The Warden wants us to forget there was ever a world beyond these walls, to believe the sky was just a dream," Doc murmured.

"Maybe most have. But I haven't. I still remember... and that's why he despises me."

"You don't hate Raburn for beating you?" Elijah breathed.

"No, I don't," Doc replied. "People are inherently good, and they spread their goodness like seeds; sometimes, those seeds catch in even the most inhospitable soil."

"Are you talking about me and Raburn?" Elijah asked.

"Don't be defined by the worst moment

in your life because of me, the Warden, or Stuey.”

“Stuey’s gone,” Elijah informed him. “Raburn told the Warden he suspected someone was bringing in drugs for the prison gangs. Stuey was searched when he arrived for his shift, and Raburn found drugs in his bag. The Warden fired him.”

Doc was quiet. Elijah thought he had fallen asleep and stood up to leave.

“Seize the life Raburn is offering you, Elijah; do that for him.”

Four years later, Raburn sat among the other parents as Elijah, dressed in cap and gown, walked across the stage to receive his high school diploma.

Back on the block, Doc quietly shared the news of Elijah's achievement with the other inmates, and a wave of pride swept through them. When Elijah arrived that night to clean, he was met with such loud cheers and celebration that he worried the guards might punish everyone. But even the guards, moved by the moment, allowed the commotion to continue until every man had personally

congratulated Elijah.

Later that week, Elijah sat on the cold, concrete floor beside Doc's cell. He tore open the first envelope, glancing at the printed words before letting it slip from his fingers.

"Johns Hopkins," he muttered, his eyes already drifting to the next letter.

He tore it open.

"Baylor College of Medicine."

Doc's voice came from the other side of the small opening. "What's the offer?"

Elijah sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. "Same as the others. A full ride."

There was a pause before Doc responded. "But?"

Elijah clenched his jaw. "They're so far away." The words slipped out with frustration, his fingers still grasping the edges of the letter.

Doc's voice softened. "They're great schools, Elijah."

Elijah shook his head, turning his gaze to the cracked walls surrounding him. "Anything I need to learn, I can learn at a university within driving distance."

He was confident of this. He'd spent the

last two summers working in the prison morgue, alongside the coroner.

The man explained the postmortem procedure in measured tones, but Elijah didn't need the words. He was immersed in the rhythm of it, the soft snap of bones, the careful incision of skin; a dance of precision and calm. His hands moved with certainty, while his mind absorbed every detail, guiding them, teaching them.

There was a new self-assurance in him, a quiet fire fueled by the knowledge he had gathered. But deep down, he knew the truth: the prison had been more than a backdrop; it had been a crucible, shaping him into someone greater than he could have ever imagined. He didn't need to go far to chase his dreams. Something deep within him pulled him toward the steady embrace of what he knew, like a ship anchored in calm waters, reluctant to drift from the security of the shore.

His instincts guided him well, and now, as he stood in the hospital parking lot, the cool night air seemed to echo the certainty he felt.

Proof that all his choices, all his learning, had led him to this moment.

Elijah, in his scrubs, looked tired, his shoulders slumped from the weight of the day, but his stride was determined. All he wanted to do was get in the car and collapse.

When he opened the passenger door, Raburn was there, a familiar, proud look on his face. He handed Elijah a wrapped package.

“What’s this?” Elijah asked, his voice already losing its exhaustion.

Raburn grinned, almost sheepish despite his gruff exterior. “Something every doctor needs.”

Elijah raised an eyebrow as he opened the box. Inside was a shiny new stethoscope, polished and gleaming. His breath caught in his throat. For a moment, he was still, just staring at the instrument in disbelief.

Raburn patted him on the shoulder, his voice low. “You’ve earned it, Elijah.”

Elijah swallowed hard. “I’m not even a doctor yet...”

Raburn chuckled, a soft, warm sound that seemed to fill the space between them. “You

will be, very soon.”

Elijah smiled as he sank back into the passenger seat, the weariness of a long, hard day catching up to him.

Raburn drove in satisfied silence, as Elijah closed his eyes, fatigue pulling him under. Raburn glanced over at him as a smile danced on his lips.

4

P Doc died just before Elijah completed his residency.

Elijah had spent the waning hours of the day delivering salves and tinctures to the homeless community on the other side of town. It was the kind of work that filled him with purpose, making him feel as though he was paying forward all the good things the universe had given him.

By the time he returned to Raburn's house, the sun was beginning to dip behind the horizon. Raburn was waiting when Elijah stepped onto the porch.

"Doc's dead," Raburn announced without preamble.

"What?" Elijah sputtered. "When? How?"

“The guards found him this morning during rounds. The inmates said no one heard from him after dinner last night,” Raburn explained in a rush. “When they went in, they found him slumped against the wall.”

“Are you sure he’s dead?” Elijah asked. “He may have been resting, or in a coma, or anything other than dead!”

Raburn placed a hand on Elijah’s shoulder. “He’s dead, Elijah. The body is at the prison morgue, and the coroner will deal with it tomorrow.”

Elijah nodded, his mind struggling to grasp the news fully. “Where are you going?”

“I’m working a night shift,” Raburn explained.

This was nothing new; at least twice a month, Raburn took on a guard's night shift to monitor the prison's activities after the lights went out.

“Do you have to work tonight?” Elijah asked. “I mean, we should see if Doc had any family and what they want to do with his body.”

“There’s no one, buddy,” Raburn assured

him. "The prison will deal with Doc's remains."

Raburn had to go, but could see that Elijah was struggling.

"Elijah, look at me," Raburn urged. "Death comes to all of us. It was just Doc's time."

Elijah nodded, swallowing hard. He had never shared with Raburn the full extent of his connection with Doc, especially after the beating Doc endured at Raburn's hands. He had put considerable effort into compartmentalizing his bond with both men to make his arrangement with Raburn work.

"I'll be back in time for breakfast, and we can talk then, okay?" Raburn asked, anxious to be on his way.

Elijah nodded again and tried to smile, but it looked more like a grimace. Doc's death was an unwelcome blow.

After Raburn left, he headed to the herb garden, where he'd been meaning to plant four new beds around a small circular patch with a tall rosemary bush. Grabbing his tools, he marked off each square yard and began turning the soil. When his hoe struck

something hard, he bent to investigate, discovering a large rock obstructing his work. On his knees, he dug a trench around the rock, which felt stubbornly rooted in the ground. Frustrated, he kicked at it, stubbing his toe in the process.

“FUUUUUUCK!” he screamed at the sky.

The heavens answered with a clap of thunder. Then the clouds opened, spewing rain. The heavy drops mixed with Elijah’s tears. He cried until there were no more tears to shed.

By the time he’d showered and dressed, he knew what he was going to do. Every prisoner had an intake file, and when they died, the file was sent to the morgue with the body. He knew this because he spent two summers interning at the morgue during his premed studies, assisting the coroner with autopsies. Once he had Doc’s file, he would find Raburn, and together, they would locate Doc’s next of kin.

But Raburn was not at the prison. His car was not in its usual parking spot, and his office remained locked and dark when Elijah

approached the door. Perplexed, Elijah made his way to the morgue.

This was only the second time in a dozen years he had seen Doc's body. The first time, it was covered in blood; now, it was white and waxy. The abuse Doc suffered at the hands of others was written like a road map across his body. Cigarette burns, knife scars, and whip lacerations looked like forgotten lengths of weathered rope on his skin.

Signs of edema were evident; Doc's legs and feet were severely swollen, and his abdomen was distended. Elijah opened Doc's mouth, shining a light down his throat, lined with pink mucus. Elijah mentally checked off the symptoms of heart failure. Yes, Doc coughed a lot, but all the men on the block did. Sometimes Doc was tired, but age and hopeless repetition were the cause; at least, that's what Doc told him.

Elijah ran his hand through Doc's sparse hair; he wondered if he'd failed his friend. His hand moved to Doc's eyelids. Prying Doc's eye open, he gasped. Frantically, he pried the other eye open. Grabbing Doc's file, he

scanned the contents, but it raised more questions than the scant answers it provided.

When Elijah saw Doc's full legal name typed neatly on the file, a chill slid down his spine. A name he wasn't meant to know. One that unlocked more than just identity. His heart thundered. Silently, he pulled the sheet over Doc, eyes lingering for just a breath. Then he snatched the file with shaking hands and bolted into the night, driven by the kind of clarity that only comes when truth finally rips through a veil of silence.

Raburn didn't come home until the first light of dawn spread across the sky. He found Elijah sitting at the kitchen table and was about to ask why he was up so early. Then he saw the file on the table. He got himself a cup of coffee and sat across from Elijah.

"Grayson Dillard Raburn," Elijah began, pointing to the file. "Mother, Brenda Raburn, deceased. Father, Mason Raburn, occupation: prison warden. Younger brother, Drake Raburn."

Raburn took a sip of coffee, staring at Elijah.

“Doc was blind from birth,” Elijah continued.

“It says that in his file?”

“You’ve never read it?”

“Didn’t need to.”

Elijah paused before responding. “No, I guess not.”

Raburn took another sip of coffee.

“Did Doc kill his mother when he was twelve?”

“No, he did not.”

“Did you?”

“I was ten when my mother was murdered, but I didn’t kill her, and neither did Doc.”

“Do you know who murdered her?”

“I do.”

“Is that why Doc couldn’t have access to pen and paper?”

“Wouldn’t have mattered. Doc didn’t know how to read and write.”

“Then why put Doc through hell?”

“Our mother poured all the love she denied my father into Doc. He was jealous, and in a fit of drunken rage one night, he killed her and blamed Doc.”

"And you knew the truth and did nothing!"

"I made a deal with the man who killed our mother... because I couldn't let my brother die," Raburn said, voice trembling.

"Those stories Doc used to tell?" Elijah asked.

"Our mother," Raburn replied.

"His knowledge of herbal remedies?"

"Our mother."

Elijah nodded again.

"He had a good memory, like you," Raburn said. "He saw a lot of himself in you."

"He talked about me to you?"

"Those nights I worked late," Raburn explained. "Were nights I spent with my brother."

"What would you do?"

Raburn's face softened. "He liked to take long showers," Raburn laughed at the memory. "We'd go for walks in the yard. He liked that."

A knock interrupted their conversation. Elijah rose to open the door, showing the police officer into the kitchen.

"Drake," the officer greeted Raburn, who

merely nodded in his direction.

"I'm sorry to be the one to tell you this, but your father's dead," the officer muttered.

"How?" Raburn asked.

"Looks like he fell down the stairs and broke his neck."

"Looks like?" Elijah asked.

The officer looked at Raburn before responding.

"We don't need an autopsy; he was drunk. It's pretty clear what happened," the officer droned on. "The ambulance will take the body to the funeral home. You can make the arrangements with them."

"Thanks," Raburn responded.

"Sorry for your loss," the officer replied as Elijah showed him out.

"Is that where you were last night?" Elijah asked after the officer left. "To give the devil his due?"

"Do you really want to know?" Raburn asked, his voice exuding fatigue.

"I owe you and Doc a debt I can never repay."

Raburn froze. One look at Elijah's quiet

understanding, and the storm inside him crumbled, leaving only the ache of everything he'd lost.

"Do you know why my mother loved Doc so much?" Raburn asked.

Elijah shook his head.

"Even though Doc couldn't see the world, he was the goodness and light in it," Raburn said. "Just like our mother."

"Your father was evil and darkness," Elijah said. "And you think you're like your father?"

Raburn retrieved a bottle of whiskey from the counter and saluted Elijah with it before pouring it into his coffee cup.

"You're more like your mother than you give yourself credit for," Elijah replied.

Raburn laughed harshly. "Doc used to say that."

"He was right."

Raburn's voice cut through the silence, hoarse and edged with years of buried fury. "The minute Doc died and dear old Dad was no longer a threat to him, I knew exactly what I was going to do."

"Why?"

“Because I’m not like Doc,” Raburn muttered, eyes burning. “I couldn’t forgive. Not for taking my mother. Not for stealing my brother. I held onto that hate because it was all I had left.”

Fat tears spilled down his face.

“I used to pray,” he choked, “begging God to take Doc, so that I could finally be free. Free to rid myself of this stone lodged in my chest, this vengeance that refused to die.”

His breath came in jagged bursts, stumbling with the weight of everything he could no longer hold in.

“But then... you came.”

Elijah stepped forward, placing a hand on Raburn’s shoulder.

“Doc told me to take you in,” Raburn continued. “Said you might ease the hatred festering in me. You were so much like him. I hoped he was right.”

Raburn looked at him, something fragile flickering behind his pain, begging understanding.

“I wouldn’t have stopped you,” Elijah whispered. “I would’ve stood beside you. I

would've carried the weight with you. Because I think... I think that's what Doc saw all along."

Raburn's hand shot out and gripped Elijah's, clinging to it as if it were the only thing anchoring him to the world. Sobs tore from him, deep, guttural, years in the making.

"I reminded you of Doc," Elijah whispered. "Just like I reminded Doc... of you."

5

P The door to Doc's old cell was open; Raburn sat on the floor, his back against the concrete base of the bed.

Elijah stood outside, mop and bucket in hand. When he started to clean, his voice carried to every corner of the block.

"Grayson Dillard Raburn's funeral took place in a serene, sun-drenched glade. Soft rays of light filtered through the leaves of tall trees, dappling the lush green grass below. The air was filled with the sweet scent of blooming wildflowers; their vibrant colors contrasted brilliantly with the rich greens of the ground.

The casket was adorned with simple white flowers, and a gentle breeze stirred them, carrying with it the whispers of the trees and the distant chirping of birds as if the world

itself was honoring the life we celebrated.

As Doc was laid to eternal rest, the sunlight danced across the beauty surrounding him, a comforting presence in our time of loss and a reminder of the cycle of life.

Amid the stippled sunlight and verdant greenery, we said a serene farewell to our friend and brother, one filled with love and remembrance for a life well lived in the service of others.”

THE END

A b o u t t h e A u t h o r

This story could occur in any prison, in any corner of the world. I wrote it this way to ensure the reader connects profoundly with the characters and their shared humanity. No matter our backgrounds, we all belong to the same human race, and we can all identify with the desire to seek some measure of redemption.

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