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CHANGE OF HEART

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*Justice, Mercy, and Making Peace
with My Sister's Killer*

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PROLOGUE

*“O then come hither,
And lay my book, thy head, and heart together.”*

John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim’s Progress*

GRAVEL CRUNCHED UNDER THE TIRES OF MY CAR AS I drove into the visitor’s lot at Pontiac Correctional Center on a cold Sunday morning. I rolled down my window, eyes squinting in the sunlight, to read the warning sign posted at the entrance: No weapons, no contraband, no cameras.

I pulled into a vacant spot and gathered up the few belongings I could take inside: car key, i.d., two quarters to put in the locker that would store the key during my visit. I checked my coat pockets to make sure they were empty of forbidden items: cell phone, pens.

A guard in a watchtower high above a corner of the lot looked down as I opened the car door and stepped into the crisp March air. I breathed in that air, a long,

deep breath. I worked in courthouses, as a public defender. I was used to guards. But this felt different: I was coming not as a lawyer to see a client, but as a civilian to see a prisoner. I glanced up at the guard: did he know who I was? Why I was there?

A long sidewalk led to the guardhouse. On my right, from a massive grey-brown stone edifice, I could hear the voices of men shouting, a melee of noise muffled by the prison's thick walls, distant and unintelligible.

I squared my shoulders, held my head up as I walked up the ramp to the guardhouse doors. Inside, two guards in dark blue uniforms, one man, one woman, sat impassively behind the counter where visitors sign in, their faces a blank. "Who are you here for?" the man asked in a bored tone.

I said the inmate's name. It felt strange on my lips, like a first cigarette or a word from another language. It was a name I had refused to speak for more than 20 years, a name I had wanted to be forgotten, consigned to a place where only God goes: the name of the person who had murdered my younger sister, her husband, and their unborn child some twenty-three years before. It was a name I'd sworn never to speak.

But God had other plans.

The guard handed me a pen, pushed a sign-in sheet across the counter and told me to fill it out. The sheet had a series of boxes calling for information visitors must provide: name, address, driver's license number, and so on. I was doing fine until I got to the last box: "Visitor's Relationship to Offender." I stopped, paralyzed. My pen hung in the air.

Relationship to offender? What *was* my relationship to the man whose name stung my lips? Until that moment, I would have written this: him, murderer. Me, murder victims' family member. That was where the relationship ended. But now I would have a different one, one in which we were not categories, but human beings. I would meet him face to face. I would look into the eyes that stared down my sister in her last moments. I would hear the voice that ordered her into the basement of her comfortable suburban home, just before he put his gun to the back of her husband's head.

I would shake the hand that held that gun.

Helpless, I scanned the entries above mine, searching for clues. They read, "uncle," "mother", "girlfriend," "friend."

He and I had never met, never spoken. He was not my friend.

We were not family, either. What should I call myself? Finally, I wrote the only true word I could think of: "visitor."

The guard scowled at my entry. "Are you a family member?" he asked.

"No."

"*Friend*," he muttered, writing in the word.

I locked my car key in a small metal locker to the left of the counter, dropping into the slot the two quarters the prisoner's father had given me when he learned I was going to visit his son. He had put the two coins in my palm, then taken both my hands in his and said, "*God bless you.*"

The female guard motioned me into a small room across from the lockers and shut the door. "Take off

your shoes,” she told me, inspecting the inside of each one. “Turn around.” She ran her hands firmly over my arms, legs, torso, in a pat-down search. “Have a nice visit,” she said flatly, motioning towards the door.

The guards buzzed me through a heavy steel door that led to the building where the visit would take place. I stepped into a waiting room that had been scrubbed of personality: linoleum floor, plastic chairs, vending machines, water fountain.

I took a seat to the left of an elderly couple in wind-breakers and jeans. The man was grey-haired, his face lined and creased like the folds in his jacket. He leaned forward, hands clasped between his knees, silent. The woman’s hair was coiled in a tight perm around her pale face. Across the room, as if in a mirror, sat another older couple: the man’s head slightly bowed, eyes on the floor, the woman staring off into the distance. From their expressions, a mixture of pain, stubborn dignity, and hope, it was clear: those couples were there to visit their sons.

No one spoke. We were waiting for the moment when names are called—not ours, but the names of the inmates we had come to see. Taut with anticipation, I fixed my eyes on the door through which the guard would come. Finally, after the other parents had been called for their visits, a female guard appeared and shouted an unfamiliar name. At first I didn’t respond; then I realized she had mispronounced the prisoner’s name, the name I’d waited so long to speak. I jumped to my feet.

This was it. I followed into the corridor where I knew we would meet. The prisoner’s father had told

me the drill: guards bring the inmate out, you have an opportunity to greet one another, then you are taken to opposite sides of a thick wall of glass, a desk on either side. Those instructions gave me some comfort as I waited, heart thumping, for the prisoner to appear. At least I knew what would happen first; I had no idea what would follow.

A door at the far end of the corridor buzzed opened and a tall, wiry man stepped out. He wore his brown hair short in a crew cut. The blue and white prison garb hung loosely on his frame. He looked in my direction and broke into a nervous smile. His face flushed slightly.

I walked toward him and extended my hand.

“Hello, I’m Jeanne Bishop....”