

# RELEASED SAMPLER

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BOOK 1

THE GREAT ESCAPEE SERIES

BONNIE LACY



*Released by Bonnie Lacy*  
Book One in The Great Escapee Series

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This book is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, or real places, is unintentional and entirely coincidental. The fact that the main character is named after my dad is purely ... on purpose!

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*Thanks:*

*To God. He is my Inspiration, my Source.*

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*To my Dearly Beloved for believing in me and  
providing for me so I could play.*

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*To my precious family for believing in me  
and encouraging me.*







*“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Lord has anointed and qualified me to preach the Gospel of good tidings to the meek, the poor, and afflicted; He has sent me to bind up the heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the [physical and spiritual] captives and the opening of the prison and of the eyes to those who are bound,”*

Isaiah 61:1 Amplified Bible







## ONE

“I ought to sue you! I can, you know!” Clarence Timmelsen screamed at the warden. He stiffened and shuddered. Tears of rage stung his eyes. “You’re kicking me out of prison to send me to a nursing home?” He shook his fist and growled, “I’m gonna sue your ass!”

The warden hung his head as the cell door clanged shut behind him. He turned to face Clarence through the bars, buttoning his black suit, his back rigid, emphasizing each word. “I’m sorry you feel that way. I have no control over the matter.” Then he added, “It’ll be better for you in the long run.”

Clarence rushed the cell bars, white-knuckle-gripped them and glared into the warden’s eyes. “In the long run? You mean till I die. That’s what you mean. You’re just kicking me out to get rid of me.” His voice broke. “This is my home!”

He jerked away, but not before catching sight of inmates gathered behind the bars of each cell near his, across the commons area, upper and lower level. All staring. “What are you looking at?” Clarence bellowed. His deep gravelly voice ricocheted off the wall of the cellblock canyon.

The warden tapped his foot. “Good-bye, Clarence. I’ve



known you a long time.” He checked his watch. “All the wardens before me knew it would come to this.” He cleared his throat. “Unfortunately, I’m the one on watch to carry out this final demand set forth in your proceedings by your judge.”

Clarence stared at the warden. Ice shards crackled in his veins, just like when he’d heard the word “guilty” sixty years ago. “You mean that bastard judge set this up? Clear back then?” The mental visual of the judge’s eyes burning with malice and the sharp rap of the gavel invaded his memory again, just as it had every day of every year since then.

The warden slowly nodded and stepped away from the bars.

Clarence stumbled. He knew his eyes betrayed anguish as he stared at the warden. He gripped the bars, threw his head back and roared like a wounded, trapped lion.

Silence echoed off the entire cell block until someone in the next cell snickered.

Clarence slowly rotated his head, following the sound. His eyes met Barred’s. The rookie. Behind the rookie stood Dirk, the huge professional inmate.

Clarence locked eyes with Dirk.

Barred snickered again. “Ooo, the little ol’ ladies’ll like you.” Another snicker. “You’re f—“

Dirk rose up behind Barred, drew his fist back and pummeled him. Clarence held his breath. Dirk finally stopped, and the rookie crunched onto the concrete floor.

Three guards raced past the warden, sticks poised.

Keys rattled. Handcuffs clicked.

One guard pushed Dirk past Clarence’s cell. The guard shook his head. “Stupid, stupid Dorko.”

The inmate towered over the guard. “M’name’s Dirk.” A toothless grin spread across his face. “I got yur back, Clarence. See ya on the—”

The officer yanked on the cuffs and dragged Dirk past the cell.



Clarence's eyes shifted back to the warden's face. Old people's home. Wheelchairs lined up in rows. Vacant eyes. People forgotten.

The guards dragged an unconscious Barred past—one eye already swollen shut and purple. His slack jaw trailed blood.

Randy Gerald stepped over the trickle of blood and stood before the cell door. "Clarence." He dipped his head in greeting, smoothing a drab brown uniform over his big belly. He picked at a dark spot on his shirt. Looked like chocolate pudding. He lifted his head, his eyes direct. "I'm here to escort you to your new home."

Clarence glowered.

Randy adjusted his pants. Keys jingled from his belt. "We better get a move on. We have a long drive ahead of us."

Clarence braced himself.

"We can make this easy or hard—you choose," Randy said, hand on his gun. He turned toward the central station and waved at the guard. "You can open."

"Sure thing, Sir," blared the overhead speakers.

The lock on the cell door echoed as it unlatched.

Randy entered the cell and tossed a flimsy shopping bag onto the cot.

Clarence stared at him a long time. At the warden even longer.

His thoughts spun in a million directions: stay in prison, die, maim the warden, escape. None landed on the option facing him right now—a nursing home—his final resting place.

Maybe it was his age, or being caught in a new and unexpected situation, or both, but he wanted to bust out bawling. Only once before in his life had he felt this helpless.

He stepped to the lavatory, intending to gather his belongings, but became distracted by the image in the mirror: steel gray hair combed back from his forehead and falling in waves to a black T shirt, a full beard mostly obscuring a deep scar on his



right cheek, blue eyes glaring at him, and wrinkles in places he didn't remember. Memories floated between reality in the mirror and the image of a much younger man, his hopes and dreams not yet shattered by life. The memories stirred emotion buried deep. Emotion Clarence long ago had declared not worth the pain and horror of digging up. So it had remained entombed, sealed with a capstone.

Until now.

"You ready to go, Clarence? Chicago traffic will be fierce this time of day."

Clarence swallowed, smoothed his old wool flap hat over his hair and donned his light tan jacket. He carefully pulled on his gloves and picked up the bag, gathering what was left of a toothpaste tube, the rest of his toiletries, his brush.

He scanned the cell one last time. Each cold concrete block, every crack, the stained out-in-the-open facilities, and the blue-white light overhead. It had held the years of his life, since ...

Clarence stepped to the cot, reached under the mattress and removed a folder. He stuffed it into the bag.

He turned to exit the cell only to face three beat sticks in his face.

"Really?" His face burned, his chin jutted. "It's been there sixty years, already."

The warden shoved around the guards, holding his hand out, fingers beckoning. "Come on. Hand it over."

Clarence's nostrils flared as he reached into the bag and produced the folder. The warden opened it, revealing paperwork, yellowed newspaper clippings and an old picture of a young woman.

Another growl rose up in Clarence's throat. He wiped perspiration off his upper lip. The warden picked up the picture and studied it a long time. He slowly met Clarence's eyes, eyebrows lifted.



Clarence raised his head, shoulders back. He looked him square in the face.

The warden squinted and pursed his lips, but carefully replaced the picture, closed the folder and held it out to Clarence.

Guards backed down, beat sticks replaced at their belts.

"Let's make our way out of here, shall we?" Randy stood aside to let Clarence through.

Clarence stepped onto the walkway overlooking the cellblock and froze. Inmates stood inside each cell across from his, both upper and lower levels, pounding on cell bars, stomping on the floors. Some saluted as he glanced their way. Inmates, security guards, administrators, and board members lined the way out.

He swallowed, his jaw clenched. His lower lip threatened to quiver. He squinted down the long line of people, then back at Randy. "Let's make this fast, huh?"

"Yes, Sir." Randy caught hold of his bag and led him down the walkway.

Sir. Had a guard ever called him "sir" before today?

As Clarence followed, an image of the train station sixty years ago assaulted reality. People had lined the boardwalk then, as they now lined the walkway. His white-haired preacher from back then appeared, shaking his head, judging from across time.

Randy glanced over his shoulder and hesitated. "You coming?"

Clarence hung his head and nodded. He waited with Randy at a heavy windowed door while the security officer gave the okay and the lock release buzzed. The door slid open, and as it did, his neighborhood paper boy appeared from the past—the edition of the newspaper crumpled in his hand.

Randy stepped aside to let Clarence through the door.

Clarence shuddered. He couldn't help turning to look back into the cellblock. An inmate paced behind the bars of one cell.



His hand rapped against the bars, third finger of his other hand raised in salute, eyes burned into Clarence's.

Clarence shivered. A lot of men in this prison owed him legal favors, but not everybody was going to miss him.

Randy checked his watch.

Clarence nodded.

A young woman rushed to his side, still in her dietary uniform, and touched his arm. "Sir, good luck." She swallowed. "With your life." She brought something from behind her back. "I made you this. I hope it's okay. I mean, I hope you can use it." She practically curtsied and pressed a beautiful knitted scarf into his hands, all blues and greens with a scratchy brown fringe.

He stopped once more and bowed his head. Another vision popped before him—his old neighbor lady. Eyes expressed pain she felt for him, what her mouth could never say. Hand extended with a plate of cookies he couldn't take.

Randy pushed through the door.

Clarence sucked in a breath against the chilly air. A van waited at the curb. Brown, barren land stretched behind it.

One last person from his past appeared next to the van: Judge Green glared him down. He had gleefully and vengefully sentenced him here. Clarence spat and yelled, "I hope you're long dead, you old bastard! Rotting in hell!"

He stumbled, braced his hands against the doorway and backed into a guard.

Randy turned. "Hey buddy. Don't. Don't do that. Don't make this hard."

Clarence struggled against the guards surrounding him, growled, punched and pushed away from Randy.

"God, he's strong. Do we cuff him?"

Clarence snarled and spat as they each took a limb and hoisted him off the ground, through the door, down the sidewalk.

"Don't hurt him. He's eighty years old. Careful."



“Are you kidding? He’s a wild man.”

Clarence struggled until he could fight no longer and shuddered a sob as the van loomed closer.







## TWO

The drone of the van's engine elevated Clarence's rage to explosion point. His knuckles turned white against the restraints. Kill mode.

The van pulled away from the prison. He yanked at the shackles encasing his wrists and ankles. Even Dirk couldn't have pulled out of these.

He scanned the inside of the van. Clean. Except for his bag. Socks, underwear, a change of clothes—courtesy of the prison. All he had in the world was in that bag.

He winced, remembering the last moments in prison. Tears threatened to break from his eyes as he squeezed them shut. He blew out a deep breath and shook his head.

"Clarence." Randy pulled into a gas station and shut off the engine. "We're gonna fill up."

"Why is it taking so long? We passed three old people's homes just now." Clarence leaned forward. "Where are we going?"

Randy glanced at Clarence in the rearview mirror. "They didn't tell you? Your hometown. Osceola, Nebraska." He pulled



a credit card from his wallet. "That's why it's so far. Chicago to Osceola. I thought you knew."

Clarence stopped breathing. He gasped.

Randy hopped out, swiped his card on the pump and started gassing up. He walked around the front of the van.

Clarence bounced back and forth on the bench seat, fingers stretched out. "No! No! Not Osceola!"

The side door opened. "Sorry about the shackles. But man, you're strong. You gave us no choice." Randy reached down to unlock an ankle.

"Not Osceola. I can't go back there."

"Easy." Randy straightened and tilted his head, hand on his thigh. "It's your hometown."

"I can't go back there," Clarence said. "Those people there ... they're the reason I got stuck in prison in the first place."

"I'm surprised they didn't tell you." He bent again to undo a buckle.

Clarence tensed. Poised.

Randy hesitated, grimaced and looked up at Clarence. "You're not. Not again. Listen, Clarence, I've known you a long time. Longer than most of the inmates and staff. You can either ride here like an animal—all locked up—or act like a mature ..."

Clarence flinched.

Randy flexed his arm muscles, his hands still on the shackles, brown eyes snapping. "Yeah, you're eighty. Act your age. Or at least act like someone ... never mind. Nobody in that prison back there acts like they have any brains. Including you." Randy stepped back and slammed the door.

"No. No. Please." Clarence hung his head. He locked eyes with Randy through the window.

Randy crossed his arms across his chest, his eyes piercing. He finally opened the door. "What'd you say?"

"I said please," Clarence whispered.



Randy raised his head, eyes squinted. He slowly climbed in the van. "Just one stupid—"

"There won't be any."

Randy held his stance.

Clarence focused on the shackles. "I mean it. I'm done." He held his breath, braced himself as Randy bent and unlocked one ankle.

Clarence kicked him in the shin. "Not Osceola!"

"Aggh. Fool! You ... are not only stupid ... but a liar." Randy struggled to grab Clarence's leg. He whipped his stick around, delivered a blow to Clarence's knee and locked him in.

"Ow. Ow. You f-n asshole."

Randy slammed the door so hard it shook the van. He limped to the gas pump and rubbed his shin.

Clarence fumed and cursed. He rocked the van right and left, against the restraints.

Randy kicked the tires and pounded on the van. The gas pump clicked off. He replaced the nozzle and jumped back in. Started up the van and squealed into traffic.

Randy's eyes bored straight ahead, face beet-red. He glanced back at Clarence through the mirror. "You can make this easy, Clarence," Randy yelled, "or make it hard. You decide. Either way, I am delivering you to that nursing home and leaving you there and you don't have a thing to say about it."

Clarence hung his head and could just barely reach his knee with his fingers. "I don't want to go back there."

"What'd you say?"

"Nothin. Nothing at all," he muttered. He stared out the window, then closed his eyes.

Memories flashed.

He sat in the backseat of Sheriff Faeller's 1950 Ford Fairlane patrol car.

Shackles then.

Shackles ...



He jolted awake and blinked. Green lawns beautifully manicured in better subdivisions. Church steeples. He closed his eyes again.

“Damn!” Randy cursed and slammed on the brakes. “Sorry, Clarence. Sorry to wake you. Traffic is terrible.”

Car dealerships—rows and rows of cars lined the concrete.

Hotels, construction, truck stops.

Then fields. Brown grass, trees whipped bare of leaves that scattered around the corners of farm buildings and houses.

All a blur.

Clarence opened his eyes, feeling the van stop again. He stared at a sign introducing the kingdom of fast food. A statue of a man with red hair and clown costume greeted him with a grand wave. Cars filled the parking lot. Kids bounced in a play area, scooting down a ceiling to floor slide—round and round.

Randy peered into the rear view mirror. “Gonna buy a little food.” He shifted into park and stared at Clarence in the mirror. “I’m gonna give you a choice. Shackles or no shackles. You decide.”

Clarence growled and straightened, leaned forward.

“I mean it, Clarence.” He pointed to the building. “This is a public place. Little kids. Mommies. Real people. If you aren’t gonna behave, you can stay in here, and I’ll bring you food.” Randy looked out the window. “If you have to use the bathroom, then it’s shackles.”

Clarence glanced outside, then back at Randy. “I’m not a total jerk.”

“Prove it.”

Clarence’s stomach tightened. “I’ll behave.”

“I didn’t hear you.”

Clarence cleared his throat. “I said, I’ll behave. I’ll do whatever you say.” He looked into the rearview mirror. “I give you my word.”

Randy stared back, one eyebrow cocked for a full minute. He



stared into the restaurant until Clarence thought he'd fallen asleep. He slowly opened his door, then the side door and unlocked each shackle, all without a word. Then stood next to the van. "I think you know the procedure. No—"

"I gave you my word." Clarence stared him down.

Randy nodded, then motioned for Clarence to climb out. He held the door open as Clarence slid to the edge of the seat.

"What do you want to eat? Burger, fries, pop? My treat."

Clarence raised his bushy eyebrows.

"No government funds today. I want to buy you lunch."

"Yeah, burger, fries—whatever you said." Clarence shoved out of the van and tested his legs, his hand still on the door handle.

A man and woman squeezed past him between a car and the van.

A little boy about eight years old, followed by a man, bumped into Clarence. "S'cuze me." High-pitched voice with a lisp. Hair sticking up on top. Carrying a small flat device.

Clarence watched him. So little.

People walked into the building as others exited—carrying bags of food and sodas. No prison jumpsuits. No handcuffs. All free.

He led up the sidewalk and into the restaurant.

"Got a little limp there, Clarence?"

"Nah, just need to stretch my legs."

Inside, voices echoed off the walls. Children shrieked and laughed as they romped in the play area. Bright colors startled him. A sickening mix of hamburgers, fries, and old grease combined to make his already agitated stomach lurch.

He rotated, totally overwhelmed, when it hit him—he was free. But free to do what? He scanned his possibilities. Free to go where?

He found the restroom, rushed into a stall, and the power of that thought overwhelmed him. "Oh God, let me die in here."



Trash littering the floor and missed shots on the toilet made him change his mind. "This is worse than prison."

He finished his business and limped into the restaurant.

Randy waited for him in a booth close by. The table was spread with a fast food smorgasbord—giant drinks, boxes of fries, wrapped burgers, and single serve pies.

Clarence stood over the table, clenching his fists, stomach churning.

Randy looked up, a fry dangling out of his mouth. He chewed it in. "What? You gonna run away?" He pushed at Clarence's food. "Sit, Clarence. This'll work out. You'll see."

Clarence stood firm.

Randy patted the table.

Clarence sat, coat still buttoned, new scarf wound around his neck and stared at the food. He raised his eyes to Randy's. "So this is fast food. Kinda like prison food."

Randy choked, covered his mouth with a napkin, then laughed out loud. "Yeah, I guess it is. I should have gotten you the kids meal. You get a toy with that. Kinda makes the food taste better." He jumped up. "I'll get you one." He raced off.

Clarence picked up a fry and took a bite, watching Randy return with the kid's meal. "Thanks for ... this."

Randy laughed out loud again. "Guess I should have bought you a steak and all the trimmings, huh. Go ahead. Open it."

Clarence read the games on the box then flipped it open. He looked up at Randy. "There's food in here. Kinda like a lunch box." He drew out a cellophane bag. "This the toy?" He held it up. "What is it?"

Randy grinned. "Well, it's ... I don't know. It's a toy."

Clarence set it down and unwrapped the mini-burger. He took a bite. "It does taste better."

"Told you." He smiled and studied Clarence's face for a minute. "I get why you acted out back there, I think. This can't



be easy. You've done more than your time. Fifty—what—sixty years?"

"Sixty. Every board turned me down for parole. Every one of those bastards."

"You deserve a chance at some life outside."

"I don't deserve anything." He lifted the little burger to his mouth, but put it down, without taking another bite.

"Still carrying the guilt around?" Randy tapped a fry against the container. "You paid your dues, man. No early parole? And look what you accomplished in prison—getting your law degree and all—hell, that's a lot more than I've done with my life and I've been on the outside. You've helped a lot of people."

Clarence's eyes stung with tears he wouldn't let fall. "If you only knew." He picked up his hamburger and bit into it, squeezing mustard, ketchup and onion bits out onto the wrapper. His vision blurred as he fumbled for his napkin and wiped his chin, but not his eyes.

Not here.

Not anywhere.

Not ever.

He hadn't cried yet. All these years. Not once. And he wouldn't start now.

Randy dripped ketchup onto the front of his uniform. It landed right next to the pudding stain on his mountain of a stomach. He chattered on, oblivious.

As Clarence continued to glare, a mass of reddish-blond ringlets rose just above the back of Randy's booth seat. That's all Clarence could see.

"So, you can understand why ...," Randy continued.

Clarence leaned closer to Randy but let his line of sight drift to the hair. Then to Randy. Clarence nodded and nibbled on his sandwich.

Slowly the curls lifted higher, shadowing clear smooth skin.



Something stirred in Clarence—something he hadn't felt for so long—something like humor, laughter. Joy.

Randy reached for the pies. "Apple or cherry?" He held them out to Clarence.

Clarence shrugged.

"Okay. I'll take cherry." He shoved the apple pie to Clarence. "We should have it figured out by then, but ..."

Eyes appeared, shining clear blue and full of mischief. The child hid her face in her arms then peeked up with a shy grin.

Clarence shivered. She reminded him of someone. He looked away, out the window.

Someone long ago.

"You're not eating, Clarence. Finish up and we'll be on our way. We still have a long road to go."

Clarence folded the meal into the wrapper and dumped it onto the tray.

Randy glanced up. "Something I said?"

Clarence slid over to the edge of the bench and pushed himself up.

Randy blinked. "Uh ... I guess we're ready. Hey, thanks for listening."

Clarence frowned. "What?"

"Thanks for letting me rant. You've been there. You know how it is. You have a perspective on it that most don't." Randy pushed the table away, gathered up his trash and slid out of the booth. "And now you're free."

Clarence scowled at Randy and turned away. Free? No. He was headed for a nursing home. Just another prison.

"Uh, I'll hit the head." Randy stopped. "You'll be here when I come back."

Clarence watched him walk away and stepped past the child's booth.

No child.



He looked up and down the aisle. He bent and searched under the table. Only a tiny mitten remained.

He stretched to pick it up. As he lifted it to his face, he caught a whiff of something so fresh, so real, it expanded him into another realm. Another dimension. His feet still planted on earthly soil, but for nanoseconds, his mind and emotions were drawn to another place.

Goosebumps.

Until Randy tapped him on the shoulder. He was buttoning a plaid shirt and carrying a satchel.

“Where’s your uniform?”

“Figured I’d change shirts before we got to the nursing home.” Randy shrugged. “They don’t need to know you came from prison.”

Fair enough. Clarence stuffed the mitten into his pocket and placed the kids meal toy on the table.

Outside, as they walked to the van, a hawk circled high above, screeched as it hovered, floated down to the next air current, then soared high.

Freedom.

Clarence followed it with his eyes as he slumped against the van, waiting for Randy to unlock. He climbed onto the front passenger seat, the hollow slam of the door adding the final note to the day.

Locked away.

Free for a minute.

Then bound forever.

“Never look back,” he whispered. He wound the scarf around his neck, buttoned the top of his coat, then grasped the brim of his hat.







## THREE

Katty Randolph floated into consciousness, hovering between drunken stupor and awareness of something terribly off.

She groaned. Someone had to be holding her head down. Little men with jackhammers pounded inside, even when she told them to stop in no uncertain words. Exhausted, her head fell back onto hard, packed ground.

Something licked her calf. Sandpaper would have felt better. She kicked at whatever it was. A startled and indignant snarl sent shivers up her body.

Her eyes wouldn't adjust; the visuals that reached her brain made no sense. Blocks of color bounced off the backs of her eyes. Movement tracked back and forth until she slammed them shut, her stomach threatening to hurl.

She floated back to stupor.

Katty opened her eyes again, and sunlight burned into her eyeballs. Her eyes wouldn't stay open. An awful roar assaulted her ears. Her hands flitted from rubbing her forehead to covering her ears, her watering eyes, and back to her ears again.

Waves of dizziness spiked as she raised her throbbing head too fast. Her stomach revolted, and up came too much pizza and



too many rounds, the glory of her Bar Queen status tarnished. She moaned and rolled herself into a ball.

A low growl grew louder, making her skin crawl with goosebumps. She cracked her eyes open again.

A monstrous dog house kingdom, surrounded by a crumpling fence, ruled over by a scarred and dozing dog, one eye open. He appeared more alert each time Katty looked in his direction.

Shuddering, she pulled at grass and weeds—anything—trying to hide. The roar in her ears stopped and the silence was broken by a man's deep laughter. "Hey Harriet. It moved. It's not dead, so we won't have to bury it. And it's naked!"

The last word ripped through her.

She squinted an eye open and peered through her fingers. All she had on were her favorite striped socks.

A sweaty mountain of a man in the next yard grinned. He raised his chain saw high above his head and pulled the cord.

The sound pierced her head, her body. Every nerve jangled in pain. She struggled and inched toward the house, egged on by coarse laughter.

"Lookit. It moved again. Nice socks." His laughter was joined by a guttural phlegmy cackle.

The dog king growled along with the laughter. A chain clinked as the dog stood, stretched and poised. The stretch was by no means relaxed but preparation for battle.

Katty shifted, breathing faster.

The snarling dog made a flying leap toward her, transforming into a huge lion, jaws open, fangs dripping, teeth snapping. It morphed again, yelping, as it jerked to the end of a log chain, inches from her feet.

Katty screamed, crouched. Scrambling toward the house, she slipped in mud.

"It speaks." More cackles. "Oh, no. It got its socks muddy." Raucous laughter.

Sobbing, she made a drunken beeline for the backdoor of the



drug house. She covered her chest with one hand and reached up for the door handle, still crouching, her backside to the audience.

Laughter accompanied her escape. "Oh, no. Show's almost over." The saw ripped a final horror into Katty's soul. "But, we could start a new show." The saw revved, sending tremors through her body as she fell head first inside the door.







## FOUR

The moment Clarence walked through the entrance of Hillcrest Homes, he flipped the emotion switch off. After sixty years in prison, he had that mastered.

He shoved pain and guilt deep, buried beneath daily grind.

But memory wouldn't stay down.

His dad, Dawes Timmelsen, had never missed a day of the trial and his carpentry business had suffered. His voice broke the day the sheriff and deputies transported Clarence to prison: "Son, no matter what, I love you. Be strong."

Clarence still felt Dad's fingers digging into his shoulders as deputies pried him from his father's arms. His father's face haunted him, pain carved in every line.

That was the last time he had seen his dad.

His first day in prison had assaulted every sense. Musty, rancid odors. Harsh cleansers unable to mask the smells of evil and hatred. Malodorous sewage smells. Hardened eyes staring him down. The sounds of humanity, of a community galaxies apart from where he grew up, were shocking, foul. But at the same time, complete with its own standards, right or wrong.



All had assaulted the newest arrival, with grief and pain his closest allies.

The nursing home's odor had its own unique qualities. Layers of cooking odors lingered, nearly dead floral arrangements rotted in foul water, and harsh cleaning and medicinal smells twisted into his senses, making his fast food lunch, already churning in his stomach, lurch as he followed Randy into the facility.

Old faces blended into no one.

A housekeeper rested on her mop, a slight smile bending her lips, warmth in her eyes.

Clarence looked away.

The pain then.

The pain now.

Always this brick of torment in his belly.

An abandoned walker stood outside a door, tennis balls protecting its feet. Another reminder that this was the end of the line.

Hydraulic body lifts blocked the hall.

Beds with railings.

Oxygen tanks.

Wheelchairs.

Each time Clarence avoided one visual, his eyes bumped into another. His body temperature boiled.

All logged in his memory to assault him later. All became a constant blur. He was trapped into this next stretch, this last duration of life.

"Hey, Clarence." Randy broke in. "This is cool. They have a pool table." He patted Clarence's arm. "You gotta get your own stick, man. And look. An ice cream machine. We need to get one of those for the pri—"

Clarence jerked around and glared at him.

A tall shapely woman in her fifties walked up behind Randy



and leaned around him, waving. "And you are Mr. Timmelsen, I presume."

"Clarence."

"Okay ... Clarence." She stepped beside Randy, and extended a slender hand, fingernails painted bright red. "I'm Miss Henningway, the administrator here at Hillcrest Homes." Her reddish-blond hair was cut in the latest swoop-over-one-eye style, her make-up precisely overdone.

Clarence stared at her hand.

Randy cleared his throat.

When Clarence didn't offer his, Miss Henningway smoothed her hand over her hair, then picked at a nonexistent spot on her tight black skirt.

Clarence smirked. "This the way to my room?"

"Well, uh, I was going to give you the tour." She brightened. "The million dollar tour of our humble home."

"Our humble home. This isn't where you live."

"No ... but—"

"Well, show me around. Let's get this over with."

She began an obviously practiced speech in what had to be her best tour bus voice. "Welcome to Hillcrest Homes! I am Miss Henningway—"

"You said that."

"Well, um ... yes, and ...." She trailed off and mumbled under her breath. "Welcome to ... I am Miss ... oh yes!" She placed her hands on her heart. "We are so glad to have you, Mr. Timmelsen."

"Clarence. Just Clarence." He stared, seeing not only her female torso and hefty chest, but in his imagination she became the enemy, cloaked in a demon suit, with horns, tail, and spear, complete with glasses. Satan would be proud.

"Uh, yes. Clarence. Come with me, both of you. I'll show you around." She hesitated and pointed at him, squinting. "You're a



lawyer, aren't you? I read that in your file, I think." She patted her hair. "You could be our benefactor, what with your background and influence." She beamed and fluttered her eyes over designer glasses. "We could sure use your ... expertise, Mr. uh ... Clarence."

He snorted and beamed sarcastically back. "I'm sure you could, especially my influence. I'd be happy to offer it sometime, if I wasn't so busy."

Randy leaned in beside him, hand placed under his arm. "Easy, Cowboy."

Miss Henningway blinked, cleared her throat and slipped a small post-it from her pocket. She scanned it, tucked her arm under Clarence's and began to drag him along. "Okay." She cleared her throat again, poised her feet together and recited, "We are a Christian facility, providing care for all people—all walks of life and abilities. From people who can live on their own, to the elder ... uh—"

"Yeah, the old and unwanted," Clarence growled and pulled away from her.

She continued, as if on her own planet. "We provide all forms of care for those patrons and residents who can't take care of themselves." She waved and greeted a man in a wheelchair, as they passed. "People are friendly here."

To Clarence's amusement, the man didn't look up or acknowledge her.

She paused then pushed a door wide open. "We have a state-of-the-art kitchen."

Clarence and Randy stepped inside.

Two dietary employees froze. One—her hand raised above her head, gripped a head of cabbage; the other—crouched low, his hands cupped.

Clarence took the stance and held out his hands. "Here. Throw it here."

Red-faced, they turned their backs, knives chattering,



sending cabbage chunks flying into huge bowls and onto the floor.

Miss Henningway twitched her pursed lips back and forth. Veins in her neck pumped. She backed out of the kitchen and began again. "And this is our beautiful dining room." She practically danced, patting Clarence's arm. "Notice our new flooring. It's smooth and trouble free for wheelchair riders." She tapped a foot.

"Wheelchair riders?" Clarence rolled his eyes. He skirted around her.

Randy poked him.

She continued to tap her foot, looking Clarence up and down. "You're tall for your age."

"What?" Clarence stuttered. "Why'd you say that?"

"Well, most men your age have had some loss of height. You are in ama-a-zing shape."

Clarence looked at Randy, then at her. What the hell?

She moved on. "Our living rooms are newly remodeled, also. New sofas, chairs, drapes, carpeting. The works. All the latest home designs." She paused.

"Oh, you want applause?" Clarence obliged with one loud clap.

Miss Henningway frowned. She sucked in a deep breath and blew it out through her teeth. After a short moment, the fake smile reappeared and she turned. "Shall we?" She directed them to a large community room, equipped with tables, chairs and a kitchenette. Residents were gathering in wheelchairs and walkers. A wonderful aroma wafted from the oven.

"We have a baking class once a week. Oh my, the cookies they bake in there." She patted her tummy, blushing. "But activities here are not just for women. They're for everyone." She indicated the pool table, leaning on it in a swoon, but slid along the edge into Clarence.

Only he saw it coming and sidestepped her.



Randy jumped to catch her as Clarence turned away, muffling a snort.

“Are you all right?” Randy helped her get her balance. “You must have tripped with those heels.” He cleared his throat. “Or something.”

Clarence walked on and passed an old man standing in a doorway.

The man was leaning on a walker, chewing on his words. “Another one bites the dust.”

Old bastard.

A TV game show host blared behind him, “You have just won a trip to Timbuktu—all expenses paid.”

The man raised an eyebrow. His mouth curved at one end.

Clarence glared at him.

“Harold, don’t you have somewhere to be?” said Miss Henningway, stepping between them. “Baking perhaps?”

“Nope, I’m stayin’ right here.” His eyes never left Clarence’s.

Standoff.

Still staring at Harold, Clarence shuffled from one foot to the other, his inner furnace boiling, his fists clenched at his sides. Miss Henningway tugged on his sleeve, dragging him along beside her.

Clarence pulled his sleeve away.

She motioned to another door. “Here we have the spa room, warm and cozy. All new tiles and wallpaper border. A wonderful new jacuzzi, complete with water jets and whirlpools—” She swung the door open to reveal a huge walk-in tub, filled to the top with sudsy water, steam curling around an obese woman who sat in the tub scrubbing her red face.

The woman looked up, washcloth in hand, water streaming down her arm. “Eek!” She flopped both arms, sending water flowing over the sides like a stormy sea, splashing onto the tile floor.



A nurse rushed to her with a towel, covering her ample chest, then slammed the door in their faces. But not before giving Miss Henningway a dirty look. "Do you know how to knock?"

Clarence burst out laughing. "Bonus tour."

Miss Henningway stood in place, eyes piercing holes through the door.

Randy coughed. "Mind if we keep this going? I've got to drive all the way back to Chicago tonight."

Miss Henningway puffed out her cheeks, and just as quickly, turned and smiled a last stilted smile. "Well, here we are." Having reached the hall's far end, she marched into a bedroom and swept out her arm, presenting the room as if it were a deluxe suite in a fine hotel, complete with amenities and a view. "You have a window facing ... the parking lot so ... you can see the comings and goings. And you get wonderful sunshine." She paused for effect and pointed to the wall. "Also, your own picture of our Savior, Jesus Christ the Lord."

Clarence almost flipped the emotion switch to full on anger. "Yay. Where has He been the last sixty years and now He's Lord over my room?" Clarence took a step toward the picture.

Randy grabbed his arm and snarled next to his ear. "Back down, Clarence. We can do shackles here, too. You can take the picture down later."

Miss Henningway stared. "Not all believe and—"

"You bet your nursing home, I don't believe."

Randy gripped Clarence even harder. "Shackles."

The administrator pursed her lips, her hands pressed together at her mouth.

Randy released Clarence and nodded at Miss Henningway.

"Um ... you have a closet, here." She opened the door to a cupboard, revealing a shelf above and a small clothes bar that would hold one suit and a jacket. Maybe a few shirts.

Clarence glanced down at the shopping bag still in Randy's hand.



“Oh, and the best part. Your bed.” She bent down and patted the bright blue coverlet spread on a hospital-style bed complete with bars.

Finally she opened the only remaining door, revealing ... a man: pants around his ankles, arms hugging his walker, a grimace on his face.

She gasped. “Mr. Thompson. What are you doing?”

He looked up at her, blinking. “What the hell does it look like I’m doing? I’m taking a crap. Now shut the damn door and leave me in peace.”

She complied, holding her nose, eyes watering as she staggered back. “Let’s go down the hall to the ... um ... the chapel.” She brightened. “Right this way.”

Clarence covered his mouth, eyes brimming, and immediately converted his grin to a solemn face. He glanced at Randy.

Randy wiped his eyes, covered his mouth and clapped one hand on Clarence’s shoulder.

Clarence slapped Randy on the back as he continued to wipe his eyes.

“Please.” Miss Henningway turned and beckoned to them. “Follow me.” As they reached a set of double doors, her pager went off. She retrieved it and stepped away.

Clarence strode into the chapel. Whew. Place needed a good airing out. Wrinkling his nose, he eyed the broken blinds hanging in a window and wallpaper border trailing loose.

Miss Henningway glanced at Clarence, bobbed her head up and down several times and replaced the pager on her belt, resuming her air of authority. “I’m sorry about that little interruption. Your room will be put back in order.”

Clarence grinned. “You’ll kick the son-of-a-bitch out?”

She ignored Clarence and struck a Vanna White pose. Her thick make-up had taken on an oily appearance. Her hair had turned frizzy, no longer in the smooth swoop. She was fuming, all right. “A very nice little chapel. We have some fine services



here. Priests and ministers come in, each taking turns, giving people of different faiths a chance to hear their doctrine preached." She resumed her air of authority, nodding and patting her chest. "Why, I've preached here on occasion myself."

"That's nice." Clarence scanned the room. Mismatched chairs and small altar. The final decorating touch: a huge body lift in the middle of the room. "I'm sure everybody gets elevated." He pushed the button on the lift. The swing assembly slowly rose. Amused, he walked off down the hall.

"Wait. Wait. I have good news," she said.

Clarence turned. "I'm going back to Chicago?"

Randy rushed to the lift, fumbled for the off button and cleared his throat.

Clarence took a deep breath, eyes on Randy. "I was told to be nice here." He pointed down the hall. "Kinda tough when there's an old man shitting in my bathroom."

The administrator's face bloomed, from her neck up to her forehead, in a fiery shade of red. Her upper lip twitched to the side, her hands stayed on her hips. The pager went off again and she shook her finger in Clarence's face.

He put his hat on his head, gave the brim a flourish and pulled his gloves on, starting back down the hall.

Randy hurried to catch up, still toting the grocery bag. "Wait, Clarence. Come on. She didn't know that guy'd be in there. It's all a misunderstanding."

Clarence nodded and kept on walking. "I agree. A misunderstanding that I'm supposed to be here. Take me back to your famous fast food restaurant on the way to Chicago." His nostrils flared, his breathing accelerated. He chewed the inside of his cheeks as tears dared to fill the corners of his eyes. He stomped past Harold's open door and shook his head.

Randy caught up. "Clarence, come on. They'll clean your bathroom again." He covered a snicker. "Then you can add your ... uh, you can use it like your own. You'll see."



“They kick me out of prison and dump me here,” Clarence growled under his breath. “But it looks like I don’t belong here either.” He stopped and Randy bumped into him. “Nobody cares whether I live or die. I’m an old man with nobody, nothing.” He picked up his pace again. “I need to go to the hills by myself and die.”

“You’re not going anywhere to die. You have a lot of life to live.” Randy caught up to Clarence and edged in closer. “Man, I know this isn’t great, but what else have you got?”

Clarence stopped.

In front of him, a TV blared at people in wheelchairs arranged in a semi-circle: snoozing, snoring, some staring with mouths gaping, drool dripping on bibs. One resident rocked from side to side against chair restraints. There was an eerie pause in the racket from the television. No one stirred. One man coughed, spittle hitting the carpet in front of him.

Clarence whispered. “Where else can I go?”



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Bonnie Lacy is an independent author, speaker, and creative entrepreneur of Christian Contemporary Fantasy, nonfiction, and short stories all created with the theme of Worthless to Priceless. What if you could see the angel standing behind you in the invisible realm, holding a sword right now? Yeah. That's what she likes to write about. She loves the weird things: sink holes, caves, exploring cemeteries, old store basements where you might be glad you are wearing boots. She lives in small town America where most of her novels take place.

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