

*An Excerpt From The Upcoming Novel in The Blazer Saga*

# Masquerade

## The Blazer Saga

Part One

The Job

*From the Journal of Eddie Aguado*

I always wanted to be a superhero. At least, I did until I was six. All my friends did too. I figure it's the same way for most kids.

In a world filled with restrictions, it's alluring to entertain the possibility of living without limits. What would you give to have the power to soar beyond those limits or to be more powerful than your greatest nemesis? How tempting would it be if the every day problems that held you back were problems no longer.

Superheroes deal with exploding buildings, crime bosses, and alternate versions of themselves. They don't worry about bullies, or abusive parents, or where the next meal is coming from.

Maybe my friends and I weren't looking so much to be superheroes as we were looking for the ability to save ourselves.

By the time I reached the fourth grade, I became disconnected with the whole superhero notion. Growing up in my neighborhood, it didn't take long to understand that super strength and defying gravity weren't the only fiction I watched on the tube. Most of my Saturday morning cartoons had one thing in common – the good guys fought against the bad guys. The good guys always won, heralding their values and righteous standards.

Yeah, whatever. There are no good guys.

If a guy in the world I live in has x-ray vision, he's not going to use it to fight crime is all I know.

Men and women do what is necessary to survive. Period. I don't care if they're a cop or a preacher or a president of a company or of the United States or whatever. There's no good guys and bad guys, just guys trying to survive. Most of the time they come out looking more like the bad guy, but that's

life.

If I were a superhero, I wouldn't be about truth and justice. I'd be about taking care of myself.

Then I was given a glimpse of something I didn't expect. I learned of a man who did have extraordinary powers. It seems silly, but I got excited. All the little problems that held a man down could be overcome. Maybe the concept of good wasn't so farfetched after all.

It didn't take long for reality to catch up. Who was I kidding?

There are no such thing as good guys.

There are just some bad guys who are a little more equipped to survive.

This super "guy" was introduced to me as an assignment – an assignment that paid well. Our assignment became a game to us after a while. Despite this man's potential, the ease with which we controlled him was thrilling.

When you are in control of such a powerful individual, then you become the one that's super. I controlled him, at least for a time.

I controlled Jordan Blankenship.

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My name is Edmund Aguado. Most people call me Eddie. Back in the day, I joined my brother's gang. We worked drug sales in the southeast. We started near Charlotte, but, after a while, things started going well. We expanded our turf a bit. We even managed a successful prostitution ring for a while, but we got out before that fell apart on us.

Naturally, we wanted more. We spread south and then west. Eventually my brother's friends decided to try a larger market, so they set up shop in Atlanta.

That's when we ran into trouble. We found out that most of our success had been luck. We weren't ready for competition, or for becoming such a major target of law enforcement.

We weren't ready. It showed.

In the end we were displayed as weak. That hurt us from the inside out. Smaller gangs challenged us. New recruits deserted us. Between stray bullets, jail time, and overdoses, we lost too many casualties along the way. My brother and most of his friends were among that number.

We consolidated back to our home town near Charlotte, a darkened image of what we had once been. There were twelve of us at that point. Then Sonny shot himself. Dante simply disappeared.

Alena was murdered. Her ex-boyfriend, who was never part of us, was charged with the crime, but I knew he was innocent. Telling the truth would have only weakened our numbers further, so I kept silent.

We were down to nine. Somehow I became the senior member of the group and the de facto leader. The others didn't stick with me because they thought I was a great leader, but because they had nowhere else to go. I felt most of these guys were my responsibility. I often teased the idea of rising back to glory. Most days, though, my primary goal ended up being to keep them out of jail or, in the least, alive.

Then *he* shows up. White dude. Expensive shades. Nice suit. Too nice. Teeth whiter than teeth ought to be. He shows up at my front door. I don't like it; I don't like him.

I try to be fair. Our gang is diverse after all. I'm part Hispanic. Hector, Julia, and Star are Hispanic as well. Demetrius and Andre are black. Lillian and Marty are just plain white. Dana claims to be Native American, though I think she says that just because it sounds kind of exotic.

So when this dude, who calls himself Brooks, comes to me, I try not to judge. I've seen his type in my neighborhood before, though. What am I supposed to do?

I don't let him in the house at first. "What do you want?"

"I need to hire somebody for a job," he says. "I want you."

"Why are you coming to me?"

He gives me a cocky grin that makes me like him less. "Because I know you need the work."

"You don't know nothing about me." I try to close the door.

He slips his foot between the door and the frame. "I'm paying a quarter of a million dollars." He has my attention. "Per week," he adds. I can do math well enough. That's much more than what we were pulling when my brother ran this operation.

When something sounds that good, it typically turns out to be a bad idea.

Still, I step aside and let him in.

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I agree to the deal without consulting the others. Well, Dana knows, but that's because she's always at my place. The others stay only when they need to, but Dana has become a permanent fixture.

I tell Brooks yes because I know we aren't going to stumble into any better opportunities. Plus, with that much money, surely I can figure out a solution if I run into opposition.

I tell everyone that the job pays a hundred and fifty grand a week. Only Dana knows better. I can trust her not to rat me out as long as she gets extra under the table. And as long as she doesn't catch me with Star.

We've been hired to keep tabs on a guy who lives in the small town of Twin Oaks. I show everyone a picture of our target. Jordan Blankenship. Lillian thinks he looks familiar, but she can't place him. I kind of thought he looked familiar too.

The instructions are unusual. The best I can tell, Brooks, or whomever Brooks works for, is trying to poison this guy. Brooks gave me this green serum stuff that we're supposed to get him to ingest. Marty jokes about tasting the stuff. I think he's stupid enough to try it. I convince him that it might kill him and he holds back.

Brooks tells me to only use one agent at a time and never use someone more than one. He doesn't want this guy to recognize us and get tipped off. This means I'll have to employ other help, but the nature of the work allows me to contract help without explaining everything to them or adding them to our numbers.

The group mulls over the potential profit we can make off of such an easy gig. Full participation seems guaranteed.

Sometimes life chooses to smile on you.

Well, that's what it looked like at the time.

In retrospect, it appears to have been more of a smirk.

\*

Brooks meets with me two days later. He provides me with a larger supply of the green serum and with specific instructions. Our first task is to make contact with another agent in Twin Oaks. Banks doesn't tell us much about the guy, just that his name is Jeffrey Paulus and that he'll be the one to make the initial contact with our mark.

Dana and I leave fairly early on Saturday morning. It would be cool to make this trip just me and her, but I force myself into business mode. Truthfully, I don't know what we're getting into. Andre comes along with us.

Dana has virtually no interest in him, so that made choosing him easier.

We decide to share a room, at least till others get there. I would prefer more privacy, but you do what you have to sometimes. It helps me sleep wearing pajamas anyway. No, seriously. I prefer to sleep naked. It's more comfortable that way. It scares me though. I have this fear that the police will come in one night while I'm sleeping naked and I'll be booked without any clothes on.

Hey, some people are scared of the dark. Some are scared of spiders. I'm scared of being arrested

naked.

We check into the hotel early. I hope to send Andre out on some errands to give me time with Dana, but he plops down on a couch and begins to surf channels. Dana lays on the bed and falls asleep within minutes. I fight boredom until I'm spending money in my head. As my list grows, I realize this job better last a few months.

I'm more than ready to do something when six o'clock nears. Our destination is a swanky restaurant called Addison's. Dana used to have some family here, so she knows how to get where we're going.

There's no man waiting for us outside.

I worry that this is all a big joke.

Andrew starts cussing. Dana gets upset too. I tell them both to shut up. If Brooks said this guy would be here, I expect he'll be here. We just need to be patient. I make them come sit with me on a bench near the front door.

We sit there for fifteen minutes and don't see the guy.

I no longer "don't like" Brooks. I hate him.

Dana finally works up the courage. "Come on, Eddie. Let's just go."

I stand up in an act of defeat.

That's when I hear the voice inside the restaurant.

"Whatca mean ya don't have 'ush-puppies?"

A waiter responded. "Sir, if you don't calm down and lower your voice, you'll have to leave."

"Ow in tarnations em I supposed to calmer down when you I-talians don't even know what an 'ush-puppy is. Ya fry 'em up and serve 'em with katchup."

"Sir, this is not an Italian restaurant. Now, if you could just show proof you can pay, then we'll bring you your order."

"I can knock your teeth in. "Ow many 'ush-puppies 'ill that buy me?"

I've made it inside by that point. By far, I'm not the only one paying attention to the show. I immediately match this guy to the description Brooks gave me.

What Brooks failed to mention was this guy's temper. Jeffrey Paulus already had his arm pulled back and was ready to throw down.

"Now 'on't spew blood on me jeans. Dey da only ones I'a brought wit me."

The waiter looks more angry than threatened.

I catch the man's arm mid-swing. "Hey, Jeffrey." I speak quickly and smoothly. I've already turned him away from the waiter. "I went to the wrong place. Come on, man. I'm hungry."

Jeffrey Paulus did not calm down, but he was momentarily caught off guard. "Who you?"

"I'm meeting you for dinner, man. Eddie, remember?" He's starting to resist now.

"I don't think I know youse."

"Brooks. You know him, right?"

He squints his eyes. "Whose?"

This is exasperating. "White guy. Fancy dude. Throws around money."

"Where's da money for me daburn 'ush-puppies?"

I want to straight punch this dude. He's garnered too much attention for us already. He pulls away, dusting off his shoulder where my hand had been.

"Cuse me, son. I have business to finish." He turns back to the waiter.

What kind of crap assignment is this, Brooks?

"Jordan Blankenship." Once that name leaves my lips, I have his attention. "I'm here to help you with Jordan Blankenship."

He turns back to me. His eyes are serious. He doesn't say a word, but I can tell his whole demeanor has changed. I know I have control of the situation.

I throw my arm around his shoulder. "Come on, Jeff. Let's find hush puppies."

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Dana doesn't like that we're eating at Long John Silvers instead of Addison's. Paulus' presence does nothing to improve her mood. I can tell by the way that she isn't watching him eat that she won't take another bite of her salad.

Andre doesn't care where we eat, but he doesn't watch him either. I can't count on either one of them to talk to him, and I can't afford to lose control.

"What's the deal with this Blankenship dude?" I ask. "You know him."

Paulus looks back at him food. I'm beginning to think he didn't hear me. Or that he's ignoring me.

He's got ketchup all up in his beard when he looks at me. "Ave youse ever seen somebody try to do something and dey were stupid for it. Couldn't do 'alf of what dey claimed." He pauses, but only for a moment. "I worked wid somebody. I thought him a fool. But I was wrong. He did it." His eyes looked past me. "Tomorrow, I git to see it wid my own two eyes."

He goes back to eating fish and hush puppies.

I try to keep him going. "Your friend. What did he do?"

"He's no friend!" His voice spikes suddenly and abruptly. Dana jumps. Andre drops his fry mid-bite and goes straight to his pocket. I hold my hands out to calm them both.

"He condemned his own soul," Paulus added, quickly calmly. "That he did."

"And Blankenship? He knows about all this?"

Paulus shoves three or four fries in his mouth and shakes his head.

I keep fishing for information. "But he's connected? Right?"

Paulus is still trying to chew, so he nods.

I stop talking for a few minutes, partly because I don't think he's going to tell me anything else and partly because I can't watch him eat any longer.

Then he asks the next question.

"How da youse know Jordan?"

For some reason, I don't want to answer. "We don't know him."

"We just doin' this job for the cash, man," Andrew says casually. "Gig pays well."

Paulus grunts, bits of food flying from his mouth. Dana struggles not to gag. "Money! Dat's what's wrong wid dis world. No real motives. Just money."

Come on, dude. This is business. Let's not go down this road.

"What kind of business were you and your fri... co-worker in?"

Paulus looks up. "We're scientists."

We all look at him with skepticism.

"What happened?" asked Dana. "I mean, why aren't you still a scientist?"

Paulus smiles to show missing teeth and unchewed food. "I got in da way." He looks at me. "Ya still got money?"

"Yeah."

"Good. Git me more 'ush-puppies."

\*

Dana and Andrew start talking about all kinds of crap when we get in the car. They don't talk about the job, but they talk about everything else. The crew. Past gang experiences. Previous relationships. The old man says nothing. He just stares out the window, giving no indication that he hears what they're saying.

I want to tell them to shut up, but I don't. I'm just starting to get this weird feeling. This job seemed so simple. Easy money. But already this man isn't quite what I expected. Is that how things are going to work? Just having part of the information?

I wish Dana and Andre would understand that and be careful. I wish I could it explain it to them. But it would upset them. Or they wouldn't listen. I know these guys too well.

Maybe that's why I'm so nervous.

The next morning, we drop Paulus off about a quarter mile away from Twin Oaks Community Church so people don't see us arrive with him. I really don't think they would have paid him any attention anyway with Dana's dress as short as it is. I really don't think it was meant for church, but seeing as I never go, I wouldn't have a clue.

As we take a seat, I keep glancing back at the door, waiting for Paulus to arrive. I don't see him. The service starts and I still don't see him. I get nervous.

I see the pastor, Travis Larson, sitting near the pulpit. I've never met him before, but he has a reputation that these church people either ignore or are ignorant of. There aren't many in my circle who haven't heard of Pastor Larson.

There's another man on the stage that I think I hear referred to as an assistant pastor. He looks familiar, but maybe he just has that type of face.

Then I see another familiar face. It's him. Jordan Blankenship. I get suddenly nervous. I didn't expect him to be up on the stage looking at us. What if he sees us? Recognizes us?

What am I thinking? He can't recognize what he doesn't know. And we have a plenty big enough crowd to blend into.

At one point, I notice Jordan grow tense. His gaze is momentarily stuck on something at the back of the church. I turn to make sure. Yep. Good ol' Jeffrey. Does Jordan recognize him? Or can he just smell him all the way from up there?

Then I smile. This is all it takes. This is all we have to do to embrace the sweet life once again. I take a deep breath and even sing along with the hymn.

I can't help but burst out laughing with everyone else when Jordan falls flat on his face while walking towards the microphone. It's like he's succumbing already. This is easy money.

That's the first time the thought passed through my mind – Jordan Blankenship is our pawn.

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After we eat, Andre and Dana call a cab and go shopping while I drive Paulus back to the church. I park on the opposite side of the church from the parsonage, where Jordan is supposedly living. My job is to wait while Paulus does his job. Simple.

I remember how little I like to wait. How long is this supposed to take?

I'm also uncomfortable with the fact that I have absolutely no idea what's going on in there.

Then Paulus comes hurrying to the car. There's a look in his eyes that I'm having trouble interpreting.

"Did you do it?" I ask. He simply nods his head.

"You drugged him, right?" I ask, just to get clarification.

All of a sudden, he pulls out a gun and holds it to my head.

I seriously think my heart stops.

He laughs and drops the gun. "Can't shoot nuttin' wid'out bullets."

Trying to reclaim my composure, I drive off, careful to stay out of view from the parsonage as we exit.

\*

As I wait for Dana and Andre to meet us, Brooks texts me, asking for a report. I keep it simple.

Paulus says he's ready to go home. I ask him where home is. He tells me New York. I hesitate. New York is a long way from North Carolina. Maybe Brooks has arranged him a ride home.

As Dana and Andre get in the car, Brooks responds to me. He wants me to arrange Paulus a ride

home. We also need to begin our surveillance of Jordan.

Two more of our crew will be here in the morning. Surveillance is no trouble. But no one planned on a trip to New York. Dana seems a little peeved about the thought, but Andre's cool with it.

At that point, we go to check into a new hotel. This was part of the plan all along to keep from being identified with Paulus so readily. We figure the only one who really noticed him was Jordan, but it makes sense to act with a little caution. I tell them that we should go to the hotel and figure everything else out in the morning.

Paulus doesn't like the fact that we're not leaving for New York now. He keeps a rotten attitude at the hotel. When he asks for a bottle of water, I tell him we have some in the trunk of the car. The car's unlocked, so he can pop the trunk without needing a key. I'm instinctively reluctant about letting him go out by himself, but I shrug it off. He's done his job. No skin off my back if he runs off now. Saves me a trip to New York, actually.

Thirty minutes pass. He doesn't come back in. It's starting to look like my instinct was right. I get up to go outside.

"Why do you care?" asks Dana. "We're better off if he does leave."

I shake my head. "I just need to get more stuff out of the car." It's the truth. We left a good bit down there. Andre nods his head and comes with me.

We get outside and see no sign of Paulus. I'm still not sure if this is good or bad. We open the car and get the stuff out.

Then my instinct kicks in again. I would've never checked the cooler otherwise. I pull open the lid.

All of the green serum is gone.

Andrew curses. So do I. This isn't a good turn of events.

We hop in the car immediately, leaving part of our stuff in the parking lot. We tear out of there, not certain where to go. I get lucky. We see him after driving over two miles north. He has a bulging bag swung over his shoulders. When he sees us, he runs. At least, he tries to run. We have a youthful advantage. Andre springs out of the car before I even stop. The old man makes it off the road and into the woods, but Andre overtakes him easily.

By the time I reach him, Paulus is cussing and kicking. I grab the bag of serum and pull it away. "What are you doing, Jeffrey?" I ask him as Andre continues holding him down. He calms down as Andre backs off.

"I didn't like 'im," answered Paulus. "Not at first. Looked too much like 'is ole man. Then I had da dream."

"A dream?" I laugh. "A dream about Jordan? Sounds sick, man."

"It ain't right what dey did ta me." Something hits me as he talks. I hear passion in his voice and see it in his eyes. It's enough to make me question what the true purpose is behind our actions.

Paulus continues. "Dey doin' it ta lots o' others too. Not jest me, Jordan. He may looks like 'is daddy, but he ain't 'im. I can see that now. 'Is skin might be ugly, but 'is heart's right. He's da one. I saw it. He's da one ta stop it. All dis evil. All dis bad dey do ta men like me."

He looks at me and Andrew and starts shaking his head. "He needs dis. He needs all dis. Not just as torture. Ta make 'im strong."

"Look, dude," I say, not quite sure what to do. "Let's just go back to the hotel and talk this over. We can work something out."

"No." I can tell he's not going to reason with us. He reaches forward for the bag.

*BANG!*

Paulus stops, clutching his chest as he falls. The gun fires again. I hadn't even realized that Andre had brought it with him.

I see no regret on Andre's face. He's already thinking about what to do with the body.

I start to sweat. I'm no stranger to this. It's been part of my life. But something about this time shakes me. I was starting to believe him. I actually believed he wanted to do the right thing.

Andre's already dragging the body to the car and I know I have to help.

There's no use of letting this get to me anyway.

There are no good guys, remember? Which means what Paulus was doing wasn't right or wrong. It was him looking out for himself.

It's time for me to do the same.

On the bright side, now none of us have to go to New York.

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I had originally expected this to be a smooth operation. I gave my people too much credit.

Marty arrives early the next morning with Lillian and Demetrius. No one asks about how things have been going so far, but I overhear Andrew telling Demetrius what went down. I try to think about ways to refocus everyone while I take a shower. When I get out, everyone's already gone.

I call Dana immediately. She tells me Marty took her and Lillian out shopping. She says Andre and Demetrius went somewhere. She isn't sure where.

So I'm stuck trailing Jordan Blakenship all by myself without a car.

I finally decide to rent a car and do what I've been paid to do. It's kind of a dull job, but at least it's easy money.

Blankenship goes to work at a community outreach center where he spends a lot of time sitting in an office doing paper work. He works in the shelter itself during lunch time, and then goes back to the office. The assistant pastor, who still looks familiar, stops by and chats for a little while.

Jordan leaves his office about fifteen minutes till three and makes a few random stops. He then goes to a Mexican restaurant for take-out. I decide to get something there as well. He eats it at home. Alone. I can't take much more, so I go back to the hotel. Andre and Demetrius are there, but not the others. I call Dana. She says not to wait up.

Nobody will get out of bed the next day, so I go by myself. It's a lot more of the same. Except this time, after work, he picks up this cute chick and takes her to dinner. As far as dates go, this one's boring. But I can tell he's distracted. He eats a huge steak and half of her food as well. He drops her off at her house and stops at a drive-thru on the way home.

On the way home, Brooks calls for a report. I tell him about the past two days in two sentences. Then I tell him Paulus is dead. He stays calm and asks several questions. I keep it simple, careful not to give too much information.

He says very little before hanging up.

\*

Dana comes out with me the next day. She wants me to take her back to the hotel before lunch time. I do, but all this is stupid. I'm the only one doing anything, but we're splitting the money nine ways.

When I get back to the hotel that night, I'm caught off guard. Brooks is waiting for me in the parking lot. He tells me to gather my people and meet him at an address half a mile down the road. Everyone groans, but they come along.

We get there and Brooks asks me to tell him the full story on Paulus. Most everyone looks at me funny. Not all of them knew what happened. Those that did pretend like they didn't.

Brooks listens closely. Then he asks me, "So he shot Paulus?" He's pointing at Andre.

"Yeah," I respond. "He did."

Brooks pulls out a gun and shoots Andre in the head. The girls scream. I jump back. I don't have time to register what's happened before Brooks grabs me by the hair and slams me face first into a

wall.

“Don't go off script like that again!” His scream is more intimidating than I expected. “Never! This isn't some punk turf war. I'm not paying you to make decisions for yourself. Got it? Be professional. Or I'll put a bullet in every single one of their brains!”

I feel his breath against my face. His anger lights me up, but I control myself. He pulls back. No one else has made a move.

“Now start doing your job right. I want details. I don't just want to know that Jordan got take-out from a drive-thru window. I want to know how many calories were in that bag. I want you to become experts on Jordan Blankenship. His eating habits. His sleeping habits. I want you to feel like you're freakin' stalkers because that's what you ought to be.” He looks at me like I'm a failure. “I'm paying you a lot of money. It's time you started earning it.”

Crap. What have we gotten ourselves into?

\*

Star and Julia show up the next day. They ask what happened to Andre. I tell them. It freaks them out pretty intensely. Dana says she's going home to rest. I'd call her out, but I know Andre's death panicked her, so I stay cool.

The following day, Star and Julia come with me. I think Star wants to hook up, but now I'm committed to staying focused. Brooks got his message across, but possibly at the cost of my team's loyalty to me.

Lucky for me, the day pays off.

Jordan's doing work on his car. He makes a sudden movement – the car falls. The girls don't know what's happening. I almost spaz out. Our guy's dead. Crushed. How am I supposed to tell Brooks this?

Then he does it. Oh, snap. He lifts the car. *He lifts his car!*

Star and Julia's testimony is gold. Interest has finally seized my crew. Either that or fear. Marty and Lillian come along the next day. That's when Jordan's wreck happens. Marty goes down to check it out. He tell us the brake pedal broke off and Jordan's foot smashed through the floor board. We can't believe what we're seeing. This is nuts.

Now that real action is happening, a true rotation begins. I make sure I'm involved every day, but I keep my shifts short. Brooks seems to be pleased with the reports, but he always wants more detail. I've made a habit of not arguing with him.

We notice Jordan's not feeling too well. By the following Monday, he's doing poorly. Lillian even reports that he fainted a time or two. Brooks is intrigued at this point. He doesn't say much to me in

return.

The next day, he shows up at the hotel. His presence makes everyone uncomfortable. The image of him shooting Andre is burnt into their minds.

He handpicks me and Lillian and we go out to meet Demetrius, who's currently on duty. Jordan's in the little downtown area of Twin Oaks. He doesn't look well. He gets so bad he sits down on the sidewalk. Brooks tells Lillian to put some of the serum into a cup of water and take it to Jordan.

Lillian pulls it off perfectly, getting out of there fast. There's an instant change in Jordan's demeanor. He's looking around ferociously. Brooks is pleased. I start to relax. Brooks leaves town that night.

The next day, Jordan goes to see a doctor. Nabor Sattah. I don't even know how to pronounce that. I call Brooks and tell him immediately. Brooks says little about the doctor, but gives me other instructions. Before we end the conversation, I ask Brooks if I should call back should Jordan return to Dr. Sattah. He says that he's elevating the doctor to a different team.

I don't ask questions, but the idea that there's another team for things to get elevated to makes me nervous.

I'm now in charge of making sure that Jordan ingests the serum. Dana wants to help me, but it's immediately evident that she's no good at this. Lillian, however, shows great skill in managing a plan. I even let her start doing a rotation schedule. I slip her some extra cash for it, well aware that I'd screw it up if I were on my own. She doesn't question where it comes from. Dana is apparently jealous of her, but nothing like that is going on. I wouldn't mind it, of course, but Marty stays to close to her.

We use our own group as little as possible. We also restrain ourselves from breaking into his house and tainting stuff in his fridge. He can taste the serum when he ingests it, so we proceed carefully. We often pay waiters to slip it in his drink without his noticing.

The effects don't always last the same amount of time. We think the type and temperature of the drink makes a difference. We also notice that he doesn't notice it as much when it's in the food, and that the effects are also partially diminished. We try to get specifics about this from Banks, but he confirms nothing. I think it's because he doesn't know.

I realize a couple of weeks into this that we aren't being as thorough as we should be. I find out by accident that he's doing research. On himself. This is freaking him out and he's trying to find answers.

It escalates quickly. Then one day, he begins packing. He's leaving Twin Oaks.

Brooks is ticked that we didn't pick up on this sooner, but he doesn't make a visit. Some of the team are upset. They didn't expect travel, especially considering we don't know where we're going.

I decided to shoot straight with Brooks. If he wants us to keep this up, he's got to help us step up our game. Getting to Jordan will be more difficult while he's traveling. Brooks seems frustrated at my

request, but he comes though. By the next morning, we receive a shipment of high-tech tracking equipment. Sweet.

We have trouble reconciling this change as a team, but we eventually reach a compromise. To maintain a presence in Jordan's hometown, Lillian and Marty rent an apartment in Twin Oaks. They'll keep tabs on his friends. Demetrius goes back to Charlotte. He ain't been right since Banks shot Andre.

That puts me on the road with Hector, Julia, Star, and Dana. Surprisingly, Dana doesn't seem to mind.

Jordan travels north. Most nights he doesn't even stay in a hotel. He often pulls over on the side of the road and sleeps in his car. Having Banks' tech means we don't have to stay right on his tail. Sometimes we stick with him, but often we drive ahead and get a room.

Without a regular routine and without Lillian doing the planning, the serum drops become a greater challenge.

One night, while Jordan's sleeping in his car, Hector sneaks over and puts some of the serum in a water bottle. I instantly regret the move. For one, Hector's paranoid for days after that that Jordan opened his eyes. Regardless, Jordan knows we got in his car while he was sleeping. He knows he's being followed. He knows we're close.

Things mostly settle down when we get to Upstate New York. Jordan stops traveling so much. I tell Banks where we ended up; he's not happy. Apparently, this is where Jeffrey Paulus lived. I didn't even know Jordan had figured out the crazy man's name. This makes me nervous.

He stays in Upstate New York for nearly six months.

A lot happens during that time.

I wake up one morning to find that Dana's gone. She hit my private stash hard before she left. She's took well over half a million dollars. I finally get in touch with her. She's had enough. That's all she says.

Julia dies from an overdose. Hector takes it hard. Real hard. Within a week, he's shot himself in the head.

That leaves me and Star on the road. Except she's not into me anymore. She doesn't believe that Dana left. She thinks I killed her. I didn't. Honest.

Lillian and Marty aren't together anymore. Lillian tells me Marty joined some cult thing. A cult? In Twin Oaks? She isn't happy, but she stays in Twin Oaks. She has two other girls living with her, helping her out. She told me their names, but I don't remember.

I hear from Demetrius occasionally. He isn't doing anything, but I keep sending him his share. I'm pretty sure Dana's with him, but he never confirms that.

I grow our gang in New York, mostly out of necessity. I try to just keep a group of core people around me. A couple of guys live with me and Star in the house we rent, but others just do work.

One guy introduces a girl he used to date. Her name's Mary. Apparently, Mary had asked him to help her find ways to make money. The girl's trying to get some sort of medical degree. She's smart. Gorgeous. But she has money problems. She doesn't seem to be hooked on anything, but she desperately needs money. Something's weird with her, but she proves to be a great asset. She's better at strategizing our efforts than Lillian ever was.

I come on to Mary occasionally. At first, she not interested. Then I tell her that I could consider increasing her share. She tells me no. But the next night, she's knocking at my door.

I'm confused about what Jordan's trying to do. I never really figure out if he learned enough about Paulus to satisfy himself.

He becomes an easier target. What I mean is, he settles into a routine. For several weeks, we know where he's going to be. We know what he's going to eat and where he's going to eat it. He even stops acting surprised when he consumes the serum. Does he even notice it anymore?

It's Mary who points out the obvious to me. He's doing this on purpose. He wants it to be easy for us; he wants us to give him the serum.

When she puts it like that, I get nervous.

At this point, I'm not sure what to make of Jordan. When he first left Twin Oaks, he seemed determined to solve this mystery. Now, he seems to be fleeing from it. He begins drinking. A lot. Alcohol affects him more when the serum is low in his system. He spends a lot of his time doing nothing. He'll take women to his apartment. Some nights, he never makes it home.

He's getting depressed or something. We don't spy on him with the binoculars every night, but, on more than one occasion, I've caught him sitting on the side of his bed with a gun to his head. The first time I saw it, I was torn. I didn't know if I wanted to turn away so I wouldn't see it or keep watching to make sure it would work.

The third times I witnessed it, he did it. He pulled the trigger.

I nearly have a heart attack. I haven't sworn this much in months.

The swear words keep pouring out of my mouth as Jordan rises to his feet.

He looks shaken and stunned, but, otherwise well. Which is amazing for someone who just shot themselves at point blank range.

That experience makes me question my understanding of reality. Things just...I don't know. They just don't seem real anymore.

All this stuff makes me wonder on a daily basis how all this would end.

One of the new kids, Mike, is the first to inform me of a potential problem. He's fairly certain he's notice a third party following Jordan as well. The next day, Star confirms that she also thinks someone else is following Jordan.

Mary and Star expect me to go straight to Banks. I don't plan to hide this from him, but I don't translate this as being beyond our capabilities. We're professionals; they need to remember that. That's how we got to this point.

So, the next day, I pay attention. I spot the guy easily. I let him hang around for an hour before I make my move. It's a little too easy to sneak up on him. I rip him from the car and shove him against the pavement.

“Why are you following Jordan?” I demand.

Then I recognize him. I've used him before. I once paid him fifty bucks to drug Jordan.

Now I have him pinned against the ground. He shakes his head. “I'm not following Jordan,” he says.

“Then what are you doing?”

He smiles smugly. “I'm following you.”

I feel hazy. Then I feel a prick. Looking down, I see the needle he's shoved in my arm. I don't have time to call out before I collapse on him, darkness consuming me.

\*

I awake, thinking at first that I'm in my bed. My mind's still hazy and the room is dark. Then I realize my hands are tied behind my back. I start to smile, but I realize I'm still clothed. This isn't right.

I remember the guy in the car.

The light flips on. I look up to see someone – a man – sitting across the room from me. I can see his form, but his features are darkened.

“Good morning,” he says in a raspy voice.

“What's goin' on here?” I demand, realizing as I speak that I'm still under the influence of whatever drug was given to me.

“I need a favor, Eddie.”

He knows my name. “What do you want with Jordan?”

"I have nothing to do with Jordan," he replies. "I know of him only because of my interest in you."

"What do you want?"

"I want to give you a job."

I snort. "I have a job."

"Yes. I know." He throws a bag my way. I'm still a little hazy, but I can see what it is. Cash. A lot of it. "You don't have to quit that job. But that doesn't mean you can't earn more on the side."

He walks toward me, but I still can't see his face.

"I need you and your team to acquire some merchandise for me in North Carolina."

"That's far away."

"It is from here. But not from your people back home, right? It's three dozen boxes from a warehouse in Raleigh. Vollaire Enterprises."

Vollaire Enterprises. Darren Vollaire. That gives me pause.

"Why should I steal for you?"

"Why should I argue with you over something that I can likely find someone else to do?" He reaches forward to grab the bag.

My will bends easily. "How much is that?"

"Five hundred k."

Half a mil. "We'll do it. I'm kind of surprised as the words leave me mouth."

"Good." He leaves the bag and turns away.

"Who are you?" I call out. "What you got against Vollaire?"

"My reason for striking against Vollaire is my own." He tosses something in front of me that lands with a clatter. A gold dollar. "As for who I am, you can call me Goldmine."

He walks around, cuts my bonds, and leaves before I can gather my senses.

\*

I contact Demetrius. He's actually happy to have something to do. He gets a few guys to help him. According to his phone call, the job goes smoothly. He drives the merchandise up himself. We meet up

at some warehouse that I'll meet Goldmine at later. Demetrius was instructed not to touch the merchandise. I expect him to fail at his instructions.

He doesn't disappoint me.

"What does this Goldmine dude want with thirty-six boxes of canned food?"

"That's none of your concern," says the deep raspy voice.

We both turn to find the shadowy figure of Goldmine standing behind us.

"Leave," he says. "Now."

Neither of us argue. We're barely a mile away when the warehouse explodes. I tell Demetrius to keep this quiet. He begins the drive back home the next morning.

\*

Goldmine contacts me every couple of weeks. He pays us a lot of money to do odd things. We steal anything from excessive amounts of office supplies to weapons. Sometimes he even asks us to destroy buildings or warehouses, usually ones that are empty. This part freaks me out a little. I don't want to get charged with terrorism, ya know.

Regardless, we do everything he asks. Goldmine gives us a gold coin to leave at each site. The coins look funky, not like dollar coins my granddad used to give me. I don't ask questions.

I also don't tell Brooks about our extracurricular activities.

Jordan is drinking less. He travels more, but he always comes back to New York. We occasionally lose contact with him when he travels. I've decided that we're not going to miss much if we don't stick with him every second of the day. The only thing that makes me nervous is the sight of him pulling that trigger. What if he did that when his body was too low on serum? Not that I could actually stop the trigger if I was there. Anyway, when we're not following Jordan, that gives us more time to fulfill our tasks from Goldmine.

He spends time at different libraries and at random people's houses. We fail to make connections between any of these contacts. Lillian has verified he makes occasional contact with Thomas Zachary in Twin Oaks.

This job has gotten boring, which is why I've readily agreed to take Goldmine's assignments.

We agree to do a job for him a good distance away in Pennsylvania. This job's a little different. He wants us to download information and copy that information onto several disks. I bring two guys with me, Mike and Lamar.

We're halfway done when the lights come on suddenly. My heart nearly jumps out of my chest as

guards fill the room. One face stands out among the rest. I think this is the angriest I've seen him.

Brooks.

Crap. This isn't good.

He shouldn't know anything about this. He approaches me with an infuriated expression. I try to deflect his arm as he grabs at me, but he's stronger than I expect. He grabs me and thrusts me against the wall.

"Why are you here, Edmund?"

"This isn't about you," I tell him. The guys with me stand firm, but they don't come anywhere near Brooks. If I give them the signal, I'm confident they'll try to take him down.

That would just get them killed, though.

"I never thought you were this stupid," Brooks growls. "Tell me. Who's Goldmine?"

"Look man," I say. "You never said we were exclusive. We have a right to..."

Brooks has a gun to my chin. "Who is Goldmine?"

I wait before I answer, not certain how to play this. I give the honest answer. "I don't know who he is. I've never seen him before. Not his face."

Brooks grunts and lets me go.

"This ain't cool," I say, stepping away from him.

"You idiot," he replies. "Don't you know who's been paying you all this time? You're biting the hand that feeds you."

It takes me a minute to understand what he was saying. Darren Vollaire. He's the one who hired us to track Jordan. Goldmine – whoever he is – hired us to sabotage our contractor.

"I didn't know," I say keeping with my theme of honesty.

Brooks doesn't care about honesty. There is fury in his eyes. He swivels around and fires the gun. He does so twice. Mike and Lamar are both down. I'm surprised he doesn't turn it back on me.

"I never want to see you or your crew on Vollaire's property again," Brooks says. He begins to walk away, but turns back. "And Eddie. The contract is terminated. I want you to repay your last month of earning. I'll be by to collect."

Two dead men are at my feet. I don't know what to do with their bodies. All this crap that's

happened lately, it's going to come back on me?

I knew this was too good to be true.

\*

I'm calling everyone I can on the way back to the hotel. Demetrius. Lillian. Star. Even if they aren't here, I now know that Brooks' reach is extensive. We need to gather our assets and go underground. Now.

No one answers their phones.

Come on!

I get to the apartment early the next morning and begin digging up all the stashes of cash I can remember. I don't take time to count it, but I know it's not all there. My own crew keeps stealing from me!

Star is the only one there. She wakes up and sees me running around frantic. She doesn't respond well to stress. Not anymore. I give her a recap as I'm tearing through the place.

I only get half way through the story when Brooks shows up.

"I came to collect." There's no mercy in his voice.

"It hasn't even been a full day!" I scream. "I just got back. I need more time."

"You only need time if you plan to run," Banks responds.

Star is freaking out. Brooks has no patience. He takes out his gun and shoots her.

Tears are in my eyes. All of this has fallen apart. My whole world – my family – is practically gone.

Banks points his gun at me. "Who is Goldmine?"

"I. Don't. Know."

Then Brooks' expression changes. I see the figure behind him too late. There is blood spilling from Brooks' chest.

Brooks falls.

The man behind him steps forward, a frightening mask covering his face.

He walks straight towards me.

Oh, crap. Who is this? Goldmine? Vollaire? Someone who works for Vollaire?

I pull out my gun to shoot. The guy in the mask is quicker. He's on me in no time, slamming his fist into my chest. It feels like I'm been smacked by an elephant.

The man in the mask stands over me, his voice deep and frightening. "I want to know everything about him."

"Who?" I manage to say.

"Jordan!"

For some reason, I point. I point to the box of notes and info we have on Jordan. It's everything.

The man in the mask laughs. It sounds like an evil laugh. He turns to walk away. When he reaches Banks' body, he stops, stoops down, and grabs the gun. Then he turns and shoots me.

For a fleeting moment, I believe that death has taken me.

Then I fall into darkness.

\*

I wake up four or five days later in a New York hospital. No one knows who I am or what happened to me. At first, I don't either. Two or three days pass before I remember everything. But that point, I wish I hadn't.

I find that all my bank accounts have been drained. Most have negative balances. I go to my physical stashes. Most of those are gone too. I manage to find a little over three thousand. I don't know who to blame. Brooks. Goldmine. Vollaire. The man in the mask. My own people.

Somehow, I always blame one person. Jordan.

Half of me wants to put a cap in his head, but it probably wouldn't even work.

I try to touch base with Lillian in Twin Oaks, but I never track her down. Did she end up in the same cult as Marty? I don't know.

I end up back at my old place in Charlotte. It's the place that Brooks visited when he started this whole mess. I figure I can't stay here too long, but it gives me a place for now.

Demetrius hasn't been here for a while, but I can see that someone else has.

On my bed is my money. At least I figure it's mine. I count enough to know it's over half a million.

Then I catch sight of my pillow. A gold dollar has been placed there carefully.

I always thought I was above it all, somehow.

The sight of that coin, though, nearly makes me crack.

I'm never getting away, am I?

I burn the house with the money in it. I throw the gold dollar in there too, but I don't know if those things burn.

Then I leave, not sure where to go.

I had always thought Jordan Blankenship was the pawn in this game.

It took me this long to realize that he wasn't the only one.

\*

Even after traumatic events, hope exists. Despite the thought that things will never get better, they do. I eventually meet back up with this girl I dated before Dana. She lets me move in with her. She already has one kid; it doesn't take too long before she's pregnant again.

Life is hard, you know, but at least I'm doing it legit.

Then I realize that your demons can't be escaped. Hope is fleeting. Joy is just a state of mind that you can lease.

I had honestly thought this saga was behind me. Brooks. Vollaire. Blankenship.

Then one day, nearly two years after everything had gone down, me and my lady come back home and I find it on my pillow – a gold dollar.

The next day, he sends someone to come see me. This guy presents enough proof to show that he is an agent of Goldmine.

A new job offer is extended. It's clear that I have no other option than to accept.

So I do.

When you build your life on a decaying foundation, it always circles back to decay.

Maybe one day I'll find a way out of this endless cycle, but, today, I continue on.

Because I'm not sure if a way out truly exists.