

# FACING DEMONS



ASHLEY SANDERS

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*For those who deserve a second chance*



*If we had no winter,  
the spring would not be so pleasant;  
if we did not sometimes taste of  
adversity, prosperity would not be so welcome.*

– Anne Bradstreet



## *Prologue*

*Brave men rejoice in adversity, just as brave soldiers triumph in war.*

- Marcus Annaeus Seneca

Blake Solomon stands frozen in shock in the emergency room, his eyes wide as he watches doctors and nurses attempt to resuscitate the lifeless body.

“How did it come to this?” His voice trembles.

One of the doctors rushes over to Blake.

“Sir, we’ve been doing surgery for a few hours now but his pulse is fading. We believe that any further attempts at resuscitation will be unsuccessful, what would you like us to do?”

Blake stares blankly at the doctor and then at the motionless boy lying on the gurney. He had done everything in his power to save him, this kid.

He remembers being in this hospital not too long ago, but for a very different reason...

\* \* \* \*

Five senior doctors stand at the end of the gentleman’s bed pondering the outcome of his treatment.

“It’s a miracle.”

The patient lay asleep, recovering from what many would describe as being dragged through hell and back again. Several months of chemotherapy to combat one of the most aggressive metastatic cancers these experienced physicians had ever seen and this patient had come out at the end of it without even a trace of being unwell. Certainly, there were months of explosive vomiting and diarrhoea, and the constant prayer that death would come and take away his pain. But this strong man had already been through too much to give up now. He had to make the choice—to fight this battle and live, or allow himself to be consumed by the evil cells destroying his body.

He remembers the good days, being wheeled outside for some fresh air by his son or wife or a kind nurse. He would get a glimmer of willpower and hope instilled inside of him again, forgetting the darkness for but a moment. It was these precious days that kept him pushing through the pain, and helped him forget the bad days where he would lay on the ground next to the toilet bowl, the cool surface easing his fever, whilst awaiting the next stomach explosion. Often he would pass out and just for a second he would let go, in the hope that this would be it, that he would die and be done with all this suffering. No person should ever have to endure such torture.

Maybe it was his strong resolve that kept him going. Maybe it was his powerful body, which had now faded to almost nothing, that helped him through. Maybe it was a higher power at work.

Whatever it was, Blake Solomon made it through, and now rests in peace, but alive, unaware that his life is about to change.

## CHAPTER I

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### *~ Their Stories ~*

**Rebecca:** Throughout my whole life I have never known love. I have been from foster home to foster home, to the streets and back again. From as early as I can remember, I have experimented with drugs, alcohol, and sex, trying to find acceptance in such a cruel and selfish world. Many times I thought I had found what love is, but I soon realised that men are only after one thing and they'll say or do anything to get it.

Often I thought my life was getting together—I'd find friends and become clean, and then something terrible would happen. I've been verbally, physically and sexually abused—often by the people I thought I could trust, including one of my foster dads.

The only time I ever feel safe is when I get high. Drugs know how to take away my pain. They give me peace and make me forget my worries. I feel like I'm floating, and nothing or no one can get me. If drugs are meant to be so bad then why do they make me feel so good?

I have become so blind by my addiction that I cannot see the harmful effects drugs are having on me. I used to be a smart kid, addicted to reading any and every book I could get my hands on.

Now I'm addicted to something terrible. My brain is fried and my body is fading away to nothing. When I can't get my stuff, I come down hard, vomiting and shitting all over the place til it's all out of my body.

My life is over. Finished.

Oh well, I guess nothing worse can possibly happen to me. Could it?

I have ended up in this place, this room. I don't even know how I got here. I don't remember. Or perhaps I don't want to remember. I don't even know where I am, sometimes even who I am. This room holds many painful memories I am sometimes able to forget but that often come flooding back to me and I scream and punch the walls until I collapse.

It is dull, with no window, the only light is from a small lamp with a pale red globe. The dim light shines on the pale pink walls—at least I think they're pink, I haven't seen the walls in proper daylight. There are only a few pieces of furniture in this room—a large king-sized bed with satin sheets and a wardrobe are the main items. There is a cracked mirror behind the bed with a curtain to hide it if unwanted. A small bedside table holds my only possessions in this world—a small photo of a family I don't even recognise, three tatted books that I've read dozens of times, a glass vase with no flowers and a key that I have no idea what's for.

There is a knock on the door.

My heart sinks for I know what's on the other side.

A well-built man enters. His skin looks leathery from too many days in the sun. As he gets closer I am hit by the horrible stench of stale booze, cigarettes and day-old sweat. He grins at me with his crooked, tobacco stained teeth.

“Allo sweet'art. You've got a nice tight lookin' bum there.” He winks at me.

Any normal person would cringe at the sight of him, not to mention the smell. I don't even notice. It doesn't matter anymore. They're all the same—each one as dirty as the last.

They pay more for the younger girls.

I used to care, but now it's become my way of life. It's what I know. It's all I know.

I stare at the cracks in the ceiling. I count them for the millionth time.

There is another knock on the door—this man's time is up.

My dinner is placed on the ground. I place it on my bed and sit by it, staring at the same meal I have eaten for what seems like an eternity. Today I notice something new—a small cupcake and a tiny card that reads—“Happy 17<sup>th</sup> birthday Bec. X.”

Wow. How generous of *him*.

Next to the food is a small tray with a syringe in it. They give us drugs to help us escape.

I want to escape for good.

I reach under my bed and pull out a bowl that I have been keeping these substance-filled syringes in, storing them up for over a week. I never know what's in them. Sometimes smack, other times it's crack, and on special occasions I get something completely out of control. It doesn't matter what's in them now.

My stash should do the job.

The most difficult part was going cold-turkey so that I could save up enough of the drugs. I got a lot of complaints this week, being too sick to perform. I've got the bruises to prove it.

I take one last look at my prison. I'll be glad to escape from here.

The photo of the family I never knew stares up at me. I think that's me to the left of the woman, perhaps my mother—the toddler clutching the doll. I guess I'll never know for sure.

I inject needle after needle into my scarred veins until my mind and body relax into a state of ecstasy.

I lie back on the bed and stare at the ceiling, the cracks slowly disappear, and the room turns bright white before fading to black.

**J**ason: “Come back here you piece of shit!” I yell furiously at a member from a rival gang. We were supposed to meet to strike a deal and discuss a truce but it went pear-shaped when they tried to double-cross us. A massive fight erupted—fists, baseball bats,

chains, and knives—the lot. My crew were outnumbered but still much stronger and the other gang members still standing started running. Of course we had to give chase. Nobody gets away with messing with my crew.

Nobody.

Most of the enemy crew managed to escape in their cars but a few were still trying to get away on foot. I chose the meanest, strongest looking bloke to chase—it's only fair. Being the best fighter in my crew and by far the scariest looking intimidates even the toughest guys. My well-built, tattooed body has many scars—remnants of the fierce battles I have fought to protect my own and my territory. Far too many for any nineteen year-old. Those who caused the scars came worse off, believe me.

This guy would be my next victim. I've never actually killed anyone but I do a good enough job on them to make them wish they were dead. Some never walk again.

I haven't always been like this—a violent gang-member. I was the eldest child in a nice Christian family—Church every Sunday, that sort of thing. I had two younger brothers, and my sister was the youngest. My parents were great. They were supportive and helped me while I studied Law at University. I was the youngest in my class, having been advanced a couple of years throughout school. I had an amazing girlfriend who I had planned to marry. I was the captain of the University football team. Everything was fantastic until the day when my family was murdered by a vicious Negro gang. This notorious gang killed four innocent people—*my* family.

They slaughtered them all while they slept, and just because my dad was a top cop who had led a big bust on them, putting most in jail. They were murdered, and I wasn't there to protect them. I cannot even describe the intense rage that boiled up inside me that fateful day. All I could see was red. A primal need for revenge arose inside me and everything in my world was changed forever.

That was the day I decided to join a gang and hunt the killers down.

And I did.

They are now all in jail, two of them paraplegics.

I follow the thug up an alleyway in between two run-down apartment blocks and see him disappear around a corner.

I round the corner just as the thug is pulling out his gun causing me to skid to a halt.

The thug's hand is quivering—it reminds me of the first time I shot someone and the rush of adrenaline coursing through my veins. The only difference is I've never shot to kill.

“Don't do it bro, it's not worth it...” I try reasoning with him but my voice is lost through the echo of a single gunshot.

**F**elicity: *How do I feel right now?* I don't even know how I feel and I wouldn't tell you if I did.

It feels like this whole world is ganging up on me, crushing me under its weight. I can't seem to do anything right in anyone's eyes. My parents have always expected so much of me and I've always delivered, up until recently of course. Rather than trying my best to impress I have rebelled in every teenage way possible and worse. I've become the town's wildest party-animal, a self-inflicted reputation which seems to create more trouble than any temporary fix. I have been welcomed into a dark underworld, inescapable, always meeting with new and dangerous people, flirting with sure disaster.

If only I were brave enough to actually tell you all this, rather than the lies.

After my meeting with Doctor Bryant, the chauffeured vehicle takes me home to my parents' three-story townhouse. They started my therapy sessions after my straight-A grades dropped rapidly. They think this resulted from the stress caused by my younger brother Ben dying but I don't know. We knew he was going to die so I thought I was ready. Maybe I wasn't.

Whatever.

I walk up to my room after mumbling something to my mum who doesn't even look up from her computer. My dad isn't home as usual. Probably out with one of his secretaries, or away on a “business trip”. Is mum really that naïve? I guess as long as the big-

bucks keep rolling in she'll stay put. Until her fashion magazine takes off that is.

Today at school three guys asked me out. Wow. Can't I go just one day without being pursued? It'd be nice to find a guy worthy of pursuing. I haven't found one as yet though. Bianca sat with me at lunch. She's really nice and really pretty. Maybe I will go to her party this weekend and drown my sorrows.

*What have I got to feel sorry for?* I don't know. I don't know why I feel all of these feelings. One minute I'll be happy and smiling and cracking jokes—usually at school around my friends as a front, and the next minute I'll be so down that I'll think of numerous different ways to end my life. Sometimes when I'm feeling low I'll intentionally cause a fight with one of my closest friends or my mum because for some reason it makes me feel better—it's like a boost of energy better than a sugar-high. Especially when we make up. I love that feeling. I crave it.

I crave those rare moments when suddenly, for no explicit reason I feel on top of the world, like I can conquer anything. I often rush around planning exciting new outings with friends, sit with mum and give her ideas for her magazine, and even go out into public feeling a new air of confidence.

All of this is shattered when the depression sets in.

Being extremely depressed can be dangerous. You forget all the times when life seemed to be on track with nothing to fret about and you ignore the personal promises you made never to hurt yourself again.

Right now is one of those times.

I stand next to my mirror and pull the sweatbands from my wrist to reveal my many scars—the true face of my feelings.

*Today feels different.*

I pick up my precious, trustworthy razor blade and look down at my wrists.

But something is different. The urge to cut my wrists is no longer there. I no longer feel as if I need to cut them in order to feel better about myself, which in actual fact makes me feel worse and causes a vicious downward spiral. I also no longer feel the need to take any drugs to pick me up again, so I leave my stash alone.

I must be getting better.

The therapy sessions must be working.

But *why* do I feel different today? *What* is it that feels different?

It hurts inside. Something deep, deeper than usual, is eating away at me, gnawing me to the core.

I look up at my face and see the darkness in the normally bright blue eyes, the damp cheeks from crying and the sad mouth that hasn't smiled truthfully for years.

My heart is pounding. I feel the veins in my neck throbbing hard and I look at them.

Suddenly my mind is clear of any irrational or confused thoughts. My heart is no longer aching and the persistent sick feeling inside me is gone.

I bring the blade up to my throat.

It's over. *I am free.*

**M**atthew: I'm sick of running. I'm sick of hiding. I'm sick and tired of all the terrible things that happen on this earth. Every single day I shed tears at the horrible way we treat one another. Living on the streets means I am watching my back all the time and have to sleep with one eye open. Some days are better than others. I like the days when I am able to get to the shelter in time and have a nice hot meal, a shower and a warm bed to sleep in. These nights I can catch up on weeks of broken sleep and my body can relax for once. The line-up to the shelter has been getting even longer lately. Maybe I'm just arriving later. Or perhaps the other shelters are closing down. Whatever it is, I seem to be missing out a lot more. It sucks.

We used to all get along. Homeless people had this code where we respected and were good to one another. If someone was sick, pregnant or old, another person would give up their bed for a night for them, or offer them some food. We would share what little belongings we had. It didn't matter where we had come from or why we were poor, everyone treated each other the same.

Shops around the area would help us out. Bakeries would leave unsold bread in bags out the back alley for us to take. The supermarket

would give us nearly expired goods in return for a few easy jobs such as trolley collecting. I would go to the library everyday to read and practice my English. A local chemist would also sometimes help us out with medicine if needed.

Not anymore.

Something changed in this town. A new mayor came in and suddenly the locals were no longer interested in helping us out. Thanks to his campaign to “clean up the streets” we have to be more careful about where we live, sleep and even walk as we are now hated. It wasn't only the homeless that were affected though. I used to attend a local Catholic Church—a place where I have never felt more welcome. A month after the new mayor arrived, the Church was torn down to make room for a hotel. The few African families who happily lived here were driven out with no compensation. Now we're slowly but surely being driven out too.

We used to live in peace and very rarely had to break the law to get by. Without the kindness of most of the townspeople, this did not last long.

I've been stealing for two months now to survive. Usually I resort to stealing only food so I don't starve but recently I've been trying to steal clothes so that I can walk around without looking like a hobo.

Many of my homeless buddies have been killed trying to steal food, or have ended their own lives because it has all become too hard. The murders were declared as self-defence so the offenders have gotten away with it. Last week, Alan was put into jail for retaliating to a baseball-bat wielding man who was laying into him for trying to steal an apple, which had fallen off a tree onto the footpath.

Today I am starving. I haven't eaten proper food in two weeks and I haven't eaten completely in two days. My gut feels like it is feasting on itself, and my body feels heavier than a slab of cement. If it weren't for being so keen to see my family again I would probably give up and let myself die.

Due to increasing theft, most shops have new security guards and alarm systems, so we have been turning to residential buildings and gardens for food. I know that Mr. and Mrs. Larson, who own

the local Fruit and Veg Store, keep a lot of their stock in a wooden shed out the back of their home. A high fence surrounds it to keep criminals out, but I have a pair of wire cutters—stolen from the hardware store earlier this week. Once inside I stare at the rows and rows of fruit and vegetables. My eyes become blurry with tears at the delicious sight. I grab an apple and eat it so fast you could say that I inhaled it. I grab a bucket that is on the ground and start filling it up while munching on a pear. I grab as many different types—I'd like a balanced diet.

I'm too carried away with my shopping spree to notice that Mr. Larson has padlocked me inside the shed.

“You're dead now you bloody thief!”

My heart stops. Mr. Larson is rich enough not to care about his stock of produce and begins to pour petrol onto the outside of the wooden shed. I run to the other end to find another way out but with no luck.

I grab a spade and frantically try to lever a plank of wood away just as the place bursts into flames burning everything inside.