



THE REUNION

Scotty was elbow-deep in a frozen air conditioner when his phone began to vibrate. He wiped his hands on his jeans and dug into his pocket for his phone. He didn't recognize the number, so he shoved the phone into his back pocket and leaned back into the icy air conditioner. A short, loud beep indicated he had a voicemail. Perplexed, Scotty lifted the phone to his ear to listen to the message.

"Scotty! Scotty, my man—hey, listen, this is Paul Gray! I'm here for the long weekend with my son, Zach. We came to pick up a little present I bought for myself at the marina near you and wanted to see if you'd like to head out for a little test drive on the water? Maybe do some fishing? Let me know, would love to catch up with ya!"

Paul's tone was the same as it had always been: upbeat, high-energy, confident. Scotty was a little confused as to why Paul Gray would be calling him to hang out. They hadn't spoken since high school more than 25 years ago, and even back then they weren't the best of friends, like they had been in middle school. A little present I bought for myself? Scotty replayed the message in his mind. Down at the marina? It was all a bit weird and very out of the blue, but Scotty was intrigued. He remembered seeing something online about Paul having a son right around the time Scotty and his high-school-sweetheart-turned-wife, CiCi, found out they were pregnant with Brittany, but that was almost 20 years ago.

Scotty was busy, so he tried to dismiss the idea and get back to work, but he was distracted by the phone call. What was good ol' Paul up to, and had he changed at all since high school? *If we did go out*, Scotty thought, *would we have anything in common? What would we talk about?* He worked and fumbled inside the frozen AC until it was up and running, and went to tell the kind old woman that he was done.

"Thank you, Scotty!" the old lady exclaimed as he explained that the AC was fixed and her house would be cooling off shortly.

"My pleasure. Call me if you need anything else!" Scotty said with a smile. As he walked out of the front door, he pulled her overflowing trashcans to the curb to be picked up by the garbage truck later that day. She was a widow, and he loved doing little household things for her that she couldn't do on her own. He started his truck and headed home for the day, Paul's message still replaying in his mind.

When he got home with a bag of CiCi's favorite takeout food, CiCi met him at the door with a big smile, just as she always had. He dropped the bag and wrapped her in a big bear

hug, still in love with the way her hair smelled when she got out of the shower.

“Eat by the pool?” she asked, taking the bag and heading through the front entranceway of the home.

“Sounds good! I’ll get the wineglasses and meet you out there,” Scotty replied.

They sipped wine and ate orange chicken with chopsticks and looked out at the pool. The waterfall feature was his favorite, as it added a calming vibe to the entire outdoor area and was the perfect respite from the world. They chatted about their days, CiCi sharing stories about her “little rhinos,” her affectionate name for the wild kindergarteners she was responsible for shaping and molding each day. As he tried not to bore her with tedious details about cooling coils and compressors, he remembered the phone call.

“Oh! I almost forgot!” he said as he put his wineglass down. “Guess who called me today?” he asked with a mouth full of lo mein.

CiCi shrugged.

“Paul Gray!”

“Paul? Why?” she asked, her eyebrows raised.

Scotty laughed. “Beats me. Said he was in town buying something down at the marina, wants to go fishing.” Scotty analyzed CiCi’s face for a reaction.

“That’s random. When’s the last time you guys talked?”

“Years. I may have sent him a congratulations note when his kid was born. Same age as Brittany.”

“Wow. Are you gonna go?” she asked.

“I don’t know. I wasn’t, and then I thought about it and . . . I don’t know.”

“Think about it. Brittany will be here this weekend, she may be interested in going out on the boat—I mean, if he’s bringing his kid . . .” CiCi suggested.

"I'll call him tomorrow about it. We'll see. More wine?" he asked, pouring the vintage cabernet into their glasses.

The next day was a busy one for Scotty. He decided that if he didn't call Paul as he drove into work, the day would get too busy and he would forget, so he commanded the Bluetooth in his car to call Paul. The phone rang twice.

"Scotty boy!" Paul's big, hefty voice said as he picked up the phone. "How are you, man?" Paul's smile was contagious, even over the phone.

"I'm good! How are you? Was happy to get your message yesterday. What's going on?" Scotty asked.

"Me and my boy, Zach, are in town in Fort Lauderdale picking up a little toy I bought for myself. Got a forty-two footer, center cabin, a real beauty. You free this weekend to take her out? I got enough gear. You got a kid, right? Bring him, too!"

"Wow, forty-two footer. That's not a little toy," Scotty said, and immediately regretted it. If this Paul was anything like high school Paul, that little comment just inflated his ego even more. "I have a daughter actually, she'll be in town this weekend and—"

"Bring her, too!" Paul interrupted. "We got plenty of lines, plenty of room. I went out a few months ago and saw a great white out there, man! What a sight. What do you say?" Paul asked, a little louder and more energetic than necessary. Scotty hesitated, but knew that if this Paul was anything like high school Paul, he wasn't going to take no for an answer.

"Yeah, that sounds great. Let's do it. I'm pulling into work now. Can you shoot me an email with the details tonight?" Scotty asked, putting the car in park.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah! I'll do that. Okay, cool. Looking forward to it, buddy!"

"Me too. Should be fun! I'll talk to you la—"

“Yep, talk to you soon. Bye bye!” and with that, it was silent.

Scotty smiled and shook his head. Seemed like Paul hadn’t changed much since high school, and now Scotty was wondering what he was getting himself into.

Scotty pulled into the office building and jiggled the key in the front door. He switched on the lights and headed to his office. He sat down and flipped through his planner to today’s date. First up: the 8 a.m. tech meeting. He loved these meetings, as they were sometimes the only part of the day where he could really connect with all the guys (and Tracey, their only female AC tech), and listen to their questions or concerns.

Tech meetings always made Scotty think about his very first 8 a.m. tech meeting with Drew, the founder of Shark’s AC Repair Service, at the local Boys and Girls Club. Scotty’s dad was a drinker before his mom died, and her death just sent him spiraling out of control. Scotty dreaded going home from school each day, on edge about whether it would be him or the living room wall that got the brunt of his father’s grief-induced rage.

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Not wanting to go home as a kid is how Scotty ended up in the backseat of the Jamesons’ car, which is how he wound up in the back of a police car for the first time a few hours later. But that time would not be his last. Finally, a compassionate judge ruled that his poor choices were a result of his unstable home life, truancy, and his “extended periods of unsupervised time” and mandated that Scotty go straight to the Boys and Girls Club every day after school as alternative to juvenile detention. Scotty had been annoyed but thought anything was better than going home to his dad or juvie.

Scotty looked at the keepsakes on his desk. Front and center was a plaque Brittany had made for him for Father's Day with the Sacred Six engraved in silver. There was one photo of Brittany on her third birthday and one of CiCi in the passenger seat of his first car, one of CiCi and Scotty kissing on their wedding day, and one of Drew standing in front of a Shark's AC Repair Service truck surrounded by all of the techs. Someone must have said something funny because everyone was laughing. The picture was faded, but you could see the sparkle in Drew's eyes. Every time Scotty looked at this picture of Drew, he remembered with fondness the day he met him.

The evening bus had dropped Scotty off in front of the newly renovated Boys and Girls Club. He saw a few people he recognized from school walk in and saw that everyone was sitting down and eating dinner. His stomach rumbled, reminding him that he hadn't eaten in a while. *I'll just eat and then I'll go*, he thought to himself. Scotty seemed to be a pro at formulating an escape plan, always looking for a way to get out, escape, avoid. He was weighing his options as he stood on the sidewalk. He was about to turn around and leave, and then he saw CiCi, a beautiful senior in his English class who always seemed to brighten up a room when she entered.

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CiCi hangs out here? he remembered thinking to himself, suddenly finding the decision to hang around much more exciting. *Free food and CiCi?* The choice was suddenly a no-brainer. There was something about CiCi's long brown hair and freckles that drew Scotty in. And the way her shirt peeked

up and showed just a tiny part of her stomach was a plus. She was one of those pretty girls at school who didn't even know how beautiful she was. She was kind to people, always asking others to sit with her at lunch or offering to help someone study after school. He wasn't sure why a girl like her would be in a place like this; he assumed she lived in one of the local gated communities and went home to parents who loved her and asked her about her day. He walked in behind her, but not too close, and followed her into a brightly colored lounge area. There were guys playing cards on a side table and a couple of girls doing their homework. Some kids from school were playing basketball outside.

He lost track of CiCi when an energetic man came barreling toward him.

"Hi! I'm Andrew, but you can call me Drew," he said, and stretched his hand out with a smile. Scotty held out his hand in a pathetic attempt at a handshake, and Drew took it forcefully. He shook it hard enough to make Scotty's whole torso shake.

"People can tell a lot about you by your handshake. Make sure it's strong. And look me in the eye. Try it again," Drew said, releasing Scotty's hand. Scotty rolled his eyes. He was not in the mood for Jolly Mr. Rogers over here, and now he had lost CiCi. He humored the guy and gave a half-decent handshake, and was relieved that Drew took it as acceptable.

"Come on in, did you eat yet? There's a game of cards going on over there. You got homework?" Drew asked in rapid fire. Scotty shook his head.

"No worries. Make yourself comfortable. Let me know if you need anything." Drew patted Scotty on the back and walked toward the guys playing cards. He motioned over to Scotty and said a few words, then walked away.

As Scotty walked by the card table, someone called out. “Hey. You know how to play blackjack?” a greasy-haired blond asked. Scotty nodded. The kid patted the empty seat next to him, and Scotty sat down.

Next to Scotty was a chubby kid with red hair, who was next to a skinny Asian kid with glasses, and on the other side of the greasy-haired kid was a black kid with a lazy eye. Scotty picked up his cards; he was so thankful to have a full stomach, to see CiCi, and to not be at home. He wasn’t sure if he fit in with these guys, but it was better than dealing with his dad.

Everyone looked different and talked differently, but it seemed like they all got along just fine.

“Ay, boss.” A veteran AC tech’s husky voice brought Scotty back to the present time.

“Hey man. Morning. How are ya?” Scotty asked, standing up to shake the tech’s hand.

“Good, good. Got the coffee started,” he said with a smile. The old guy’s teeth were evidence of his obsessive coffee consumption, but being addicted to coffee was better than what he used to be addicted to, so Scotty left him alone.

Everyone looked different and talked differently, but it seemed like they all got along just fine.

The other guys trickled into the office, all standing around in their dirty jeans and sipping their coffee by 8 a.m.

“Okay, guys. Good morning. We’ve got a busy day, so let’s get this going,” Scotty said, sipping his coffee.

“First, the Sacred Six,” Scotty instructed. The entire office erupted in sound, strong voices reciting each core principle in unison.

“Sharks never stop moving forward. Sharks never look down, always up. Sharks are always curious and learning.

Sharks always respect their environment and recognize other sharks. Sharks are always flexible. Sharks always elevate their suckerfish to new levels.”

As they said each one, Scotty watched their faces. They were not just reciting a string of words. They were quoting each fundamental principle with purpose. As they went down the list, Scotty could create a clear picture in his head of each lesson and what Drew had done to help him learn each one.

Scotty ended the chant the way he always did, and the way Drew had always done. “When we live in harmony with the Sacred Six, we are truly swimming like sharks. Sharks just don’t swim, they SWIM.”

“Now, Goals and Gonnas. Who’s first?” he asked, looking around. This was another one of Drew’s traditions that Scotty carried on. Every meeting always started with the Sacred Six, then everyone listed a goal for their day and how they were going to accomplish it. Not every meeting ended the same way, but the guys insisted that it always start the same exact way. The Sacred Six was like their very own Pledge of Allegiance.

“I’ll go,” said a voice from the back. “My goal is to finish the Smith unit before noon.”

“How ya gonna do it?” the entire team boomed in unison.

“I’m gonna clean the condenser fan and oil the fan motor.”

“Very good, next?” Scotty asked.

“My g-g-goal is to learn h-h-how to use the vacuum pump,” stuttered someone up front.

“How ya gonna do it?” they all asked again.

“Would someone m-m-mind showing me again h-h-how to work it? Maybe on our lunch break?” the man stuttered, looking around. Tracey lifted her chipped coffee mug as a toast and nodded.

The Goals and Gonnas practice allowed each tech to vocalize their goals and made everyone aware of everyone else’s goals.

This way, they could hold each other accountable and help each other out.

“Any issues, problems, achievements, good news, or concerns we need to address before we start our day?” Scotty asked

“I got my two-year chip,” Tracey said quietly from the back. She held the shiny medallion up with a timid smile like she had just won the Heisman Trophy. The entire office erupted in applause.

They could hold each other accountable and help each other out.

“Way to go, Trace!” Scotty said with a proud smile. Pregnant and homeless at 15, Tracey hadn’t had it easy. After the adoption of her little boy had become final, she had found herself scared and alone and had turned to booze to fill the void. After countless stints in the ER for alcohol poisoning and two DUIs when she was 18, Tracey had found herself with a handful of pills and no hope. Scotty was the one who had found her unconscious on the park bench, called 911, and waited in the lobby for four hours as they pumped her stomach. It was Scotty who had been there when she was discharged, who had taken her home and given her some of CiCi’s clothes to wear. It was Scotty who had let her recover in his beautiful guest room, and it was Scotty who had given her the ultimatum: you either stay here and go to AA, or you leave. That was two years ago, and not only was she now two years sober, but she had her own apartment, was a phenomenal AC tech, and was working on her GED.

The lights and radio in the office came on at full blast, the official start of the workday. Tools buzzed, phones rang, and 10 AC trucks with ferocious sharks splattered on them left the

store in waves, off to cool down the homes of South Florida, one AC at a time.

Scotty and CiCi ate greasy pizza off paper plates and clinked their beer bottles together. They sat at their outside bar overlooking the pool, with Lionel Richie music playing softly in the background. Scotty looked over the pool and into the Intracoastal that ran behind their home. His boat was tied to the dock, bobbing in the water. His upcoming fishing trip made him regret not taking his own boat out more often, and he made a silent vow to take CiCi out on a romantic sunset ride soon. She loved boat rides, and she loved Lionel Richie!

"I was telling my kids about the shark today," CiCi smiled, biting into her pizza. "They didn't quite get it. They were asking me how they could be sharks if they weren't allowed to swim without their Mommy and Daddy," she laughed.

"Valid point," Scotty smiled. "Maybe five is too young to understand the complexities of the shark and the Sacred Six?" he asked sarcastically.

"Maybe. We'll wait 'til they're more mature. Like seven."

"Yeah. Seven's good."

As they sat in silence and watched the huge yachts pass by, their daily reminder of how good life had become, Scotty spoke.

"Ya know, I didn't think I'd be nervous or anxious about this fishing trip, but I am," Scotty said, suddenly unable to finish his pizza. "It's like when I talked to Paul, all of sudden I felt like I was seventeen all over again, feeling small. Trying to keep up with school hero Paul. I felt nervous again and remembered being in his shadow. Insecure, I guess." Scotty felt embarrassed saying it out loud. CiCi gently touched his arm.

"You aren't seventeen anymore," she said softly. "You are a very successful, kind, strong, giving, hardworking man who

loves his family and loves others. You have built an incredible life for us, and you have come so far. You are not your past mistakes, and you cannot compare yourself to anyone else,” she said with confidence. “What do we tell Brittany all the time?” she asked.

“You are not your past mistakes, and you cannot compare yourself to anyone else.”

“You are who you hang out with,” Scotty said begrudgingly.

“Right. And who do you hang out with? Good people from rough pasts who are transforming their lives. You hang out with givers and dreamers. You’ve built a company that is not only wildly successful in our community but has given life back to so many people. You’ve given us this beautiful home and these wonderful experiences. So many families struggle to send their kids to college, especially the ones like Brittany’s, and your hard work means she gets to go follow her dreams and not graduate with debt. That is life changing. You’re the best person I know, and you have zero reasons to feel insecure or anxious about this trip,” she said as she squeezed his arm. “You took Drew’s business to the next level and grew it into a South Florida empire.”

“You are who you hang out with.”

Scotty smiled at her. She was always so passionate, reassuring, and positive. CiCi was his own personal motivational speaker, and he knew she meant every word. He just didn’t know if he believed in himself as much as she did. Scotty was occasionally haunted by his past and sometimes struggled with

his own success. Thinking about being with Paul Gray again, after all these years, made Scotty feel like an insecure, pimply, invisible teenager who could never measure up. He thought he had outgrown these emotions—how could one phone call bring them all back?

Scotty was occasionally haunted by his past and sometimes struggled with his own success.

“I can tell you don’t completely believe me yet, but you will,” CiCi said, interrupting his thoughts. She had sat up in her lounge and was looking right at him.

“No, I do, I do. It’s just that he comes from this perfect family and has done all these perfect things and has been successful and here I am, an awkward kid with a dead mom and alcoholic dad and a mugshot,” Scotty moaned.

“Look at me,” CiCi said in all seriousness. She grabbed his chin and yanked it, so he was looking right into her eyes. He noticed those freckles and smiled. “You are not that kid anymore. Your past does not define you. Your childhood trauma does not get to steal one more second of your life. You are successful, you are smart, you are good enough and,” she said as she put both hands on the side of his face, “you’re really hot, too,” and leaned in to kiss him. Scotty needed these pep talks occasionally, as his past always tried to hunt him down like a stalker.

“Your past does not define you.”

The morning of the fishing trip, Scotty was still anxious. He tried to remember all the things CiCi had said the night before and repeated them over and over in his head. *I’m not*

that seventeen-year-old kid anymore, Scotty reminded himself as he poured his steaming hot coffee into his thermos. *I'm a grown man, and the insecurities and self-doubt are gone. I always look up, and I never look down. This'll be fun*, he thought, as he entered the garage to collect his fishing gear.

"Hey, Dad!" Brittany said, startling Scotty as he rummaged through the garage.

"Oh hey, Britty, just getting some stuff ready for the trip. You ready?"

"Yep! Who is this guy again?" she asked.

"Old buddy from high school. We kinda drifted apart when I got involved in all of my nonsense, haven't really talked to him since. Dangit, where is the . . ." Scotty trailed off.

"And he just randomly wants to hang out now?" Brittany asked, confused. Scotty realized it was pretty random, but kept pushing forward.

"Yeah, he's in town. He bought a boat from the marina down the street, so we'll take it out and—ah! Here it is!" he said, holding up a tackle box. "We'll take the boat out, spend the day on the water, catch some fish. Should be fun. Ready?" Scotty asked, fumbling with his coffee and all of the fishing gear. Brittany grabbed the tackle box and turned to go back into the house, noticing that her dad wasn't quite himself. The sun wasn't even up as they loaded everything into Scotty's truck and pulled out of the driveway. "Fishing with Paul Gray," Scotty whispered to himself.

Scotty could see Paul, and his new boat, the moment they pulled into the parking lot of the marina. The sun was just peeking up over the water, and the water was calm. Paul was hard to miss in his freshly pressed khakis and a polo shirt. What was harder to miss was the massive vessel under him, a stunning boat with a sprawling deck, spacious stern cockpit, and extra seating toward the bow of a boat.

Scotty and Brittany were walking toward the boat when Paul spotted them. He leaped onto the deck and embraced Scotty in a full-on bear hug. It caught Scotty off guard but helped to relieve some tension he had about the trip. As Paul released him from his embrace, Scotty stepped back to take a look at the older version of Paul Gray.

Scotty wondered if Paul knew they were going on a fishing trip or if maybe he thought they were going golfing at a country club. The polo shirt, perfectly pressed, had the collar flipped up, and it was hard to miss the bulge of muscle peeking out from each of the sleeves. His khakis looked brand new. His Docksidiers were shining in the sunlight, and the diamonds around his wristwatch caught the small rays of sunshine coming up over the water. Paul's hair was thick and curly and he still had a full head of it, causing Scotty to subconsciously think about his own hair, wondering if Paul could see the gray popping through or the thinning area Scotty was sure would become a bald spot any day. When he smiled, Scotty immediately thought Paul would be a perfect candidate for an "after" picture in any dentist's office, although Paul had never needed braces. His teeth had always been nice, but now they perfectly straight and perfectly white. Almost too perfect. Scotty ran his tongue over his teeth and made a mental note to get to the dentist and to find his old retainer; he hoped it would still fit. He immediately regretted his wardrobe choice for today's adventure: the jean shorts Brittany always referred to as Dad shorts, a faded "I Survived the 5th Annual Dunn's Run" T-shirt, and the used-to-be-white, almost-green tennis shoes he used to mow the lawn. Scotty secretly hoped Brittany wasn't embarrassed by her fashion-challenged dad and his lack of biceps or enlarged gut from drinking beer and watching football.

Paul welcomed the two on board, clearly pleased with his new toy.

“Beautiful boat, Paul, really,” Scotty said, placing his fishing gear down.

“Fell in love with her the minute I saw her. Happens a lot with me, ya know.” Paul winked at Scotty and nudged him with his elbow. A handsome young man sat in the corner of the boat, eyes and thumbs fixed to his phone, in shape, looking exactly like Paul Junior minus the flipped collar.

“Scotty, this is my son, Zach. Zach, come say hello!” Paul said. Zach looked up from his phone with a quick but forced smile. “Hey,” he responded, before quickly returning to the comfort and solace that only his phone could give.

“Kids and their phones, right?” Paul responded, walking toward the back of the boat. Scotty and Brittany followed.

“Paul, this is my daughter, Brittany,” Scotty said, putting his hand on his daughter’s back. Paul got comfortable in his captain’s seat and adjusted his hat.

“Oh, right right, hi, Brittany, nice to meet you,” Paul said, quickly standing up and holding out his hand to shake hers. “You jokesters ready to go?” he asked, turning the key of the boat to start the engine. He expertly navigated the giant boat out of the marina and into the Intracoastal. He cruised right by the Finn estate, but Scotty didn’t even care to point it out. “Gonna name her Paula,” Paul said to no one in particular, tapping the side of the boat.

“So tell me about my dad as a kid,” Brittany asked Paul, with a curious but slightly mischievous smile. Scotty felt nauseous, but not because he was seasick. Brittany knew about his rough past, but he wasn’t sure what stories Paul would decide to tell.

“Aww, man, Scotty was my buddy. We met in seventh-grade PE class when I accidentally decked him in the head with a kickball,” Paul started, using air quotes for the word *accidentally*.

“Kid was bleeding, nose and mouth all covered in blood. I picked him up and ran him to the nurse’s station. He weighed, like, nothing. So we got him all taken care of, and then we were just buddies after that. All through middle school. We went fishing together, explored the woods behind his house, dominated in neighborhood games of Cops and Robbers. Then we got to high school and we both joined the swim team.”

“Wait, wait, wait. You can’t just jump to high school. What about middle school? What about our fishing business?” Scotty asked.

Paul started laughing. “I totally forgot about that, man! Yes, what was it called? For Real Fishing?”

“For Real Fishing,” Scotty said in his best commercial announcer voice.

“Where we catch your fish for real.”

“Creative,” Brittany said sarcastically. Scotty explained the premise of the business: For Real Fishing was designed to catch fish for people who didn’t have time to go fishing. The business model was simple: the boys would take their hand-me-down fishing gear down after school or on the weekends and catch fish for their “clients.” As an added bonus, the boys offered to place the fish on the client’s pole so the client could tell their wives that they caught the fish “for real.” They would go to great lengths to eliminate any evidence that 12-year-olds did the fishing, in the hope that they could deceive neighborhood wives into thinking their husbands were great fishermen.

“Did anyone use this suspect business, for real?” Brittany asked through her smile.

“Yeah, the one nice guy down the street. That guy loved our idea. And he made us feel like we were on a secret mission and that if his wife ever found out that he wasn’t catching these fish ‘for real,’ she would be so mad. Now that I think about it,

we were the probably the only two who thought it was a good idea,” Paul chuckled.

“We were like fishing ninjas. We’d catch some fish and then sneak on to his back porch and attach the fish to the hook that just happened to be propped up in the corner of the back patio. We’d grab the wadded-up dollar bills he left for us in the planter—a secret stash, of course—and run home as fast as we could. He’d wink at us when he saw us around town. We felt unstoppable,” Scotty explained.

“We were always doing stuff like that. When Scotty’s parents were too—” Paul stopped short. “Scotty would spend the night at our house a lot. We’d stay up all night playing video games and watching movies. He’d go to church with us on Sundays, and sometimes we would even take him to school on Monday. We were like brothers,” Paul said as he put his arm around Scotty’s shoulder. “We would be together every day in the summer.”

The two swapped stories as the boat cut through the waves. They swapped tales of middle-school adventures and sleepovers. They even tried to re-create their secret handshake. They thought back to weekends out on Mr. Gray’s boat, camping in the backyard (and not making it past 11 p.m.). It was the summer between eighth grade and high school that the boys discovered their love for the water. They had spent all day swimming in the summer, jumping and racing each other in the lake just outside of Lake City, Florida, where Paul’s grandparents lived. They were both determined to make the high school swim team their freshman year. Swimming in the lake was much safer than the ocean back home but much more exciting than a pool.

“Scotty and I had this little competition going on, the four hundred meter medley—remember, Scotty? He’d always try to beat my time. He was good, though, had a killer butterfly stroke.

Best butterfly on the team for sure. But then he started hanging out with the Jameson brothers and kind of . . .” Paul drifted off, suddenly realizing he may have said too much in front of Brittany.

“Yeah, after my mom died I got caught up with the wrong crowd. Hung out with the wrong people. My grades started slipping, so I got kicked off the swim team. Swim was my life, so when I lost that, I felt hopeless. Kind of stopped showing up at school altogether,” Scotty said, but he knew Brittany knew this already. “I felt lost, was looking to attach to anything and anyone who made me feel seen. Got in some trouble, really was heading down the wrong path.”

“You are who you hang out with,” Brittany commented, repeating the phrase he and CiCi often used as she was making friends throughout school. Scotty knew the impact that words can have on someone’s life, and he and Cici were intentional about being very careful about what they said around Brittany. They wanted her to hear positivity and strength. They wanted her to hear them say good things about her and about other people. Scotty could remember many of his father’s catchphrases, most of which included the “F” word. Scotty knew firsthand how the things your parents say to and about you can stick with you for a lifetime. The Sacred Six was something Drew repeated and reinforced on a daily basis, and it had stuck with Scotty ever since. Scotty knew there was truth in what Drew used to say—that when you hear something enough, you begin to believe it.

Scotty knew the impact that words can have on someone’s life. . . .
When you hear something enough, you begin to believe it.

“Right. That’s something we would tell Britty even as a little girl, and it stuck. Kids are listening, always listening, which is why

as parents we have to be so careful about what we say and how we say it. You know what I mean, Paul?” Scotty asked, pretty sure Paul didn’t. Paul nodded, and seemed eager to dive right back into narrating one of Scotty’s most regrettable life choices.

“And those jerks didn’t even vouch for you,” Paul continued with his story. “Ran off and let you take the fall. I couldn’t believe it when I heard you were up at 44th Street. I was like, ‘little’ Scotty? Doing time?’ I couldn’t believe it!” Paul said with a chuckle.

Out of the corner of his eye, Scotty saw Brittany’s mouth drop to the floor. This part, she didn’t know. Until now. He avoided eye contact with her and tried to push through the story.

“Yep. Possession of an illegal substance—one hundred and eighty days. It was just a few weeks after I turned eighteen. Cops pulled us over for a broken taillight and asked to search the car. Of course, we were freaking out, but when the cops found what they found, the guys acted like they had never seen weed before. But it was my car so I took the fall for them, and since it was my first real offense, they gave me a little break. Didn’t have to do all one hundred and eighty days, but it was the worst two months of my life. But thank God, I got it together and was able to get back on track,” Scotty said, realizing how fast he was talking, a result of nerves and wanting to get through the story as quickly as possible. Finally, he looked over at Brittany, who looked like a deer in headlights. “Enough about me. Let’s talk about Mr. All-American over here,” Scotty said, playfully shoving Paul with his shoulder.

“This guy, he was a beast,” Scotty started.

“Was?” Paul interjected, flexing his muscles. “Ask my personal trainer, he’ll tell you that I am still a beast.” Paul smirked. Brittany tried not to roll her eyes.

“He was captain of the football team and swim team in high school, did barely any campaigning and won Student Government president by a landslide,” Scotty said.

“My competition never stood a chance, can’t even remember that nerd’s name,” Paul said proudly.

Brittany, spunky like her mom, couldn’t help it this time and her eyes almost rolled out of her head. Scotty knew he was losing Brittany fast and the day had just begun.

“Prom king, too?” Scotty asked, even though he knew the answer. Paul nodded with pride.

“While we were all frantic about filling out applications for college, schools were coming to school to find this guy. Where’d you end up going?” Scotty asked.

“Got my undergraduate in business at USC and my master’s at the University of Chicago. Started as an intern at the place I’m at now, cutthroat, I tell ya. Had to hurt some feelings to get to the top, but that’s business.” Paul shrugged.

“People ’round Chicago know me, Scotty. They either love me or they hate me. Made some enemies to get where I am, but I gotta look out for me, you know? They know not to mess with Paul Gray. They know I mean business and I’m not afraid to call people out, ya know what I mean? People who love me love me, people who hate me are just mad ’cause they ain’t got what I got. Now I’m VP of sales, and with bonuses I’m making ’bout a mil. Not bad for an all-American kid from Broward, huh?” Paul bragged as he nudged Scotty.

“I’m busy, but I’m living and loving the snowbird life, too. I love popping down here for a break from the Chicago wind,” Paul said as he propped his feet up on the steering wheel and laced his fingers behind his head. “I mean the tax man thinks I snowbird, but who really snowbirds?” Paul winked and a mischievous smile spread across his face. “It’s all good, everyone lies about that stuff,” he said, explaining himself even though nobody had questioned him about it. It was silent for a while as the boat roared into the open ocean, quiet except for the clicks and beeps of Zach’s phone.

Scotty peered out into the water, Paul's sentence about how much he made replaying in his head. He was trying not to let the realization that he made more money than Paul—a lot more money than Paul—get to his head. He couldn't help but feel a tiny sense of satisfaction, knowing full well that Paul only shared this information because he was confident it would impress Scotty. Scotty had a hard time processing the information. He felt proud, but then he felt guilty for feeling proud. Scotty's inner cheerleader was doing backflips in his head. *How could the second-chances AC guy be making more than the all-American VP? And what did it mean? Did it even matter? What did it change about their dynamic?* Scotty tried to let it go. *Don't make it a big deal*, he thought to himself, *stop thinking about it. Let this be a lesson not to make assumptions.* Scotty felt a small private victory and grew a little more confident, but Paul still didn't have a clue.

"So tell me about your wife," Scotty said after a few minutes of silence and after the cheering in his head stopped.

"Ah, Charlotte. Real trophy I got there. Gorgeous girl, smart, funny, life of the party. Met her at a networking event a few years ago. Hottest girl in the whole place and she came right over to me," Paul smiled. "She walked right up to me and said she had heard things about me, and she liked a powerful man. We hit it off right away."

"What does she do?" Brittany asked, now clearly unimpressed with anything Paul had to say.

"She stays home. She had a dead-end job at an accounting firm, but I told her to quit, let me take care of her. She loves to travel, so we're always in new places. We're going to Rome next month for our third anniversary."

"Third?" Scotty asked.

"Oh yeah, she's my second wife. She was the upgrade," he winked. Scotty didn't respond and was suddenly uncomfortable about how Paul was talking about women in front of his daughter.

“Me and Junie, you remember June? Senior year?”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah!” Scotty replied, remembering the gorgeous cheerleader who had tagged along with Paul throughout high school.

“She ended up going to USC right along with me. Didn’t trust me a million miles away on a college campus without her, so she came along. Can’t blame her,” Paul smiled.

“So we did the college thing, she survived all my college shenanigans and then she was all expecting to get married, so I got her this crazy rock, took her out to dinner, and asked her to marry me. I think we got pregnant with Zach that night.”

“Gross,” Zach said, his second word since the boat left.

“I mean any woman who could put up with me through college is a keeper, right? She was loyal, just like a puppy. We tried to make it work, but I was out and about too much. And she was always complaining about spending money and debt and all of that nonsense. I kept tellin’ her that we can’t just try to keep up with the Joneses, we gotta *be* the Joneses, right? She would have never let me get this boat, would have said, ‘We’ve got too much debt. We don’t need it,’ in that whiny voice. But I wanted to travel and buy new cars and go to the casino and she was just such a buzzkill, man. Then you add my late nights, traveling, networking events. Didn’t work out. So we got divorced about four years ago.” Scotty did the math.

“Mmm-hmm,” he acknowledged.

“And now Charlotte and I are living the dream. You’ll have to meet her, she’s a ten and doesn’t ask too many questions, you know?” Paul smiled, giving Scotty a thumbs-up. Brittany pretended to gag.

Scotty waited for Paul to ask him about CiCi, but he didn’t, of course.

"That's great, man, yeah, I'd love to meet her. And you need to meet CiCi."

"CiCi Peters?"

"Well, CiCi Finn now, but yeah," Scotty said proudly.

"Scotty Finn snagged CiCi Peters? Way to go, man!" Paul raised his hand to high-five Scotty. Scotty wasn't crazy about the term *snagged* but humored Paul and high-fived him anyway.

"When I finally got out of jail, I had nobody to call. The only number I had was the number to the Boys and Girls Club, which I got from the judge with strict instructions. I had no friends, my mom was gone, my dad was unstable. All I had was the Boys and Girls Club to help me pick up the pieces. That's how I met Drew. When I got first got to the club I knew I had no choice but to make it work. I knew it was a second chance. God always gives us second chances. But I thank my lucky stars every day for the Boys and Girls Club that led me to Drew, who led me to CiCi."

"God always gives us second chances."

"He was a good guy, Drew was," Scotty smiled. "Really stepped in to be the dad I needed around that time. He let me work for him at his shop and CiCi and I got to know each other better away from school. We dated for about three years, and I proposed by the lighthouse on the beach. We got married and had Brittany soon after." Scotty smiled, winking at Brittany and trying to curb her annoyance.

"Sounds nice man. Happy for you. And you like what you're doing? Fixing ACs?" Paul asked. Scotty knew that ever since he had gone to jail, Paul had started to pity him. Maybe it had started before that, all of those nights Scotty's parents had been too drunk to pick him up from swim team and Paul's parents

had brought him home. Or maybe it was when Scotty's mom died. Whenever it was, Scotty knew Paul felt sorry for him, the kid who could never quite measure up and fell into trouble. Part of Scotty knew that Paul still felt that way, even now. The way he had asked if he was happy fixing ACs felt condescending and almost accusatory.

"I think this is good," Paul said, shutting off the engine and bringing the boat to a stop. The water was calm and Scotty got to work preparing the fishing gear. Brittany jumped up to help, handing Scotty what he needed and portioning out the bait.

"You going to fish, Zach?" Scotty called toward the center console, where Zach sat still, mindlessly scrolling through his phone.

"Nah, I'm good," he said without looking up. Scotty glanced at Paul, who just shrugged.

"What are you going to school for?" Paul asked Brittany.

She baited her line and threw it overboard, fighting through her annoyance before answering. "Business," she replied. Scotty could tell Brittany was not Paul's biggest fan, and smiled to himself at how much she was like CiCi.

"Ah. Smart girl. Want some advice?" he asked, but continued before she could answer.

"Few things: you gotta get yours. Nobody is going to be watching your back, nobody is going to hold your hand. You want something, you go get it. Now people aren't gonna like you for that. They're gonna be mad that you got what they want, but that's life. Another thing: don't trust people. You think they're your friends and *bam!* They throw you under the bus and take the promotion that you were after. But ya know what, they'll get theirs. You rise up, become their boss, then fire them for some BS to show 'em who's in charge." Paul laughed, clearly speaking from experience.

“And a third thing: you don’t need anyone else. You have everything you need to be successful; you don’t need the approval or help of anyone else. Everything should be on your terms, so if you fail, it’s on you, but if you succeed, it’s all on you. All these self-help fuddy-duddies can tell you that business is about people, but it ain’t true. Business is about the bottom line, the profit. If you can’t make your people make those goals and make that money, you’re not a good leader and you’re not gonna be successful. You’re not a real businessman, or businesswoman in your case, if people aren’t afraid to piss you off. If they know you’ll come for them, they’ll do their job and you’ll make money. We’re not here to hold hands and sing kumbaya. We’re here to get a job done, and anyone that can’t handle it can go. We all need to do what we gotta do. That’s my two cents.”

Brittany couldn’t even breathe, let alone respond. All of it was so completely the polar opposite of everything she knew to be true. She kept her back toward Paul, speechless and annoyed. She pretended to be focused on fishing, and Paul didn’t seem to notice her lack of response.

Scotty could let a lot of things go. The way Paul talked about his wife, the way Paul bragged about his questionable business practices—but one thing he couldn’t let slide was someone telling his daughter that business is about profit before people. He knew Brittany could handle herself. He knew, at least he hoped she knew, that everything Paul had spouted out was the opposite of everything she knew to be true. But what kind of dad would he be if he just let someone speak to her about her future career that way?

“Actually—” Scotty began, finally reaching the point where he couldn’t let Paul’s comments go. But just as he opened up his mouth, he was interrupted.

“Holy hell. Do y’all see that?” Paul yelled. Everyone followed the direction of his pointed finger, directed into the water toward the horizon.

“What? What is it?” Brittany asked, with a little apprehension in her voice. Paul was quiet. Focused.

“What?” Scotty asked. At that moment, a slice of gray penetrated the water and moved slowly forward, perpendicular to the boat. It took Scotty a second to realize what it was.

“Is that a—” Scotty started

“It sure as hell is, Scotty boy. That right there is a shark. Right there! I saw one last time I came up here, too! What a sight!”

“Should we bring our lines in or anything? I don’t want him to come near the boat,” Brittany said, sounding a little more anxious this time. The shark disappeared and then reappeared a few feet closer to the boat. Scotty could see an aha moment in Paul’s face as he made a beeline for the back of the boat. He opened up a large storage container and pulled out a huge blue bucket and a heavy-duty fishing line.

“This’ll do it,” Paul said quietly as he pushed by Brittany.

“This’ll do what?” she asked nervously. “What are you doing?”

Without a word, Paul emptied the bucket of bloody fish off the side of the boat.

“What in the world?” Brittany shrieked, looking over at Scotty in desperation. Scotty was nervous again but didn’t want to overreact. Paul seemed experienced and like he knew what he was doing. And it was his boat.

“It’s a baby. With this rod and that chum, we might just be able to get him on board!”

“Is that even legal?” Brittany shrieked.

“Eh, we’re not going to keep the guy. Just bring him up to say hello. Scotty, grab that net over there for me, will ya,

buddy?” Paul asked, pointing to the back of the boat. Scotty hesitated and glanced at Brittany, who looked dumbfounded that he was even considering it, then hurried to grab the net.

Scotty saw that the shark was quickly approaching the dead fish that was floating near the boat. The thing had to be few feet long, and even from a distance Scotty could see the tell-tale markings of the ocean predator. Paul threw his line in and steadied himself. He was focused and determined to do this, and nobody was going to tell him otherwise.

Scotty recognized Paul’s focused expression; it was the same one he’d had as he stood on the diving platform in high school, determined to cut through the water like a knife and leave everyone else in his wake.

“Here we go!” Paul shouted as the line tightened. “Got ’m on my line!” Scotty and Brittany stood back, watching the young shark fight and flail in the water. They watched as Paul pulled and reeled, pulled and reeled, making progress with each tug. The shark inched its way toward the edge of the boat, splashing and slapping its tail on the water. The shark was getting tired, and Paul was gaining strength. The two battled for what felt like hours, each determined to win, Paul’s muscles swelling like he had just left the gym. *His personal trainer must be proud*, Scotty thought.

“I’m gonna pull him up! Back away!” Paul shouted as the tired young shark got closer to the boat. Brittany and Scotty stood in silence. Their whole life was influenced by this misunderstood and dynamic fish. Paul was focused and oblivious all at the same time. The moment so intense that even Zach put down his phone.